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Thesis

JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE: the man and the dramatist

by

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Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature

It does not seem amiss, before considering the life and work of any author, to search a bit into the national literary background which was his inheritance. Such a study is especially necessary in the case of any Irish author, for here we find ourselves confronted by the problem: what is the inheritance of a real Irish author? His inheritance is not so simple as is that of an author of any other nationality. An English author, for example, has the whole wealth of centuries of English literature to draw from. A French author has, in a similar manner, the whole wealth of centuries of French literature from which to draw. We could say the same for a Russian or a Spaniard. But what of the Irishman? Is there an Irish literature? Yes, but it is not so simple a thing to understand as is the literature of nations more fortunately gifted in national life and background. Strictly speaking, Irish literature is that literature written in the Irish language, and that alone. The literature written in English by Irishmen is not really Irish literature. It is Anglo-Irish literature, and as distinct from Irish literature as Irish literature is from French. It is this Anglo-Irish literature that we shall have to consider in relation to Synge.

It is extremely difficult to pass judgment on Anglo-Irish literature for the very simple reason that we don't know what to use as a criterion in judging it. English literature is judged by Englishmen and lives or dies by English standards. The same is true of the literature of other nations. But what of Anglo-Irish literature? It cannot be judged by purely English standards because it is not purely English. Likewise, it cannot be judged by purely Irish standards because it is not purely Irish. Here, at the outset, we are confronted

by a real difficulty. Our confusion is only increased when we consider that Anglo-Irish literature is the literature of expatriation. That is, it is the literature written by Irishmen who have ceased to be Irishmen. It is not our purpose here to dwell on this theme, but consider Padraic Colum, Frank Harris, Monk Gibbon, James Joyce, Lord Dunsany, Sean O'Casey, St. John Ervine, George Moore, G. B. Shaw, etc. All of these men are expatriate Irish authors, and in naming them, we have only begun to sound the list. It seems, that while these expatriate writers continue to derive their material from Irish life, their treatment of it is limited and determined by foreign literary moulds. Consequently, Anglo-Irish literature, written by expatriate authors, does not express real Irish life for real Irish people. The purpose of these expatriate literary men is not to express Irish life to Irish people. It is rather to explore and exploit this life for their foreign audiences,- audiences who know too little about Ireland to be properly critical.

This state of affairs, recognized by many Irish people, was one of the factors that led to the establishment of the Abbey Theater. We shall consider this movement later on, but it is our purpose now to show the position of J. M. Synge in the Anglo-Irish literature we have been considering. Synge felt that Ireland had not learned to express its real self through the medium of the English language. The expatriate authors we spoke of previously were not part and parcel of Irish life; they didn't belong. Consequently, they couldn't express Irish life from within as they themselves were not within. Their education had been English, not Irish. Things Irish seemed as strange to them as they seemed to the foreign audiences to whom they tried to explain them. Things English they understood much better. But therein lay the diffi-

culty. Ireland is as different from England as England is from France. He who would gain a real understanding of Irish life must constantly bear in mind three factors, three factors with which our expatriate authors forget to deal. And because they forget to deal with these things their work is not Irish.

Let us state briefly these three all-important considerations, considerations with which any real Irish literature must deal. First, we have the religious consciousness of the people; second, we have Irish nationalism; and third, we have the land. These three factors are in great measure self-explanatory. We may add, however, a few words to each. The religious consciousness of the island drenches the whole national life. It is inescapable. It is felt rather than seen, but it is none the less real for all that. Things learned at a mother's knee are not soon forgotten. Add centuries of sanctity to age-old doctrines, and you get an idea of what the religious life of these people means to them. Irish nationalism is a thing which countries more favored politically find it hard to understand. It is the product of centuries of abuse and neglect, nourished by hundreds of exoduses and famines. Its historical significance is too great for us to deal with here. We merely state it baldly as fact. As to the land, we have only to bear in mind that fifty-three per cent of the people in Ireland depend upon it directly for a livelihood. One need hardly amplify this statement to show what an influence the land must play in the heart of the people. The people are peasants. It follows naturally that any real Irish literature must have its roots in the soil. We have stated the three considerations above as indicative of what should be the theme of any real Anglo-Irish literature. It is because our expatriate writers do not choose to deal with these themes that they fail as Irish

literary men.

But why have we gone to the trouble of assembling these few pertinent facts about Anglo-Irish literature and life? Merely because they are so pertinent! The traits of this literature have been so little studied, so little understood, that some such introduction is absolutely necessary before we can begin to understand the position of an Anglo-Irish dramatist like Synge. And, as Corkery says, Synge was a portent in this literature.[1] With him, as we shall see, Anglo-Irish writing emerges as Anglo-Irish literature, a literature just as unified as is English literature. Synge treats of Irish life as a native Irishman. The language he uses is English, but the result is none the less Irish for all that. And therein lies the importance of Synge. We may almost say that he does for Anglo-Irish literature what Goethe did for German literature, what Dante did for Italian literature. He created a standard. Before him we find not exactly chaos, but after him we certainly find more light. Synge did what few before him had been able to do, and what few have done since his time. And of these few, none can compare with him in beauty and richness of language and feeling. He was one of the pioneers in creating a new literature (no small task), a literature that, while it may use the English idiom, is striving to reproduce Irish life. The expatriate authors do not do this. They are really not Irish. They are English, aside from the accident of being born in Ireland. Synge, and his fellows of the Irish Renascence movement, turn squarely about from this form of writing. Their purpose is different. Let us now consider their purpose as it is exemplified in one of its most successful adherents, John Millington Synge.

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[1] D. Corkery: Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, page 1

The Man: Formative Influences

Edmund John Millington Synge was born, we are told[1], April 16, 1871 at Newtown Little, near Rathfarnham (a little suburban village three and three-quarter miles south of Dublin). John received a good start in life by being born the youngest son of a family of eight.

Of Synge's parents we need say, and can say, little. It seems that his father, John Hatch Synge, was a barrister-at-law. His wife, Kathleen Traill, came from an old ecclesiastical family. The conjugal life of this couple was quiet and harmonious. Synge's parents were simple honest folks who didn't care for society, but preferred the simple life. It must be said at this point, that John Hatch Synge was a strict Protestant, and J. M. Synge was brought up in that faith. Synge later professed no religious nor political affiliations, yet this fact of his early training is important because Synge, as an Irish dramatist, might be expected to profess the Catholic faith. This is certainly not the case, as even a cursory reading of his plays will suffice to show. Synge does not deal at all adequately with the religious life of the characters in his plays, a failing we shall notice and discuss in greater detail later on. Like his religion, or rather like that of his family, Synge's ancestry was also English. His family was one of the English landlord group that came to Ireland in the days of Queen Elizabeth.

It may be well at this point to establish the pronunciation of Synge's name. Bourgeois tells us the story that the name Synge was formerly only a sort of nickname. One of Synge's ancestors sang as precentor in the Chapel Royal. King Henry VIII, hearing this man sing was so impressed by the sweetness of his voice that he commanded him to henceforth take the name of "Synge". Thus, the name is pronounced

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[1]Maurice Bourgeois: Synge and the Irish Theatre, page 1

like Sing. This fact is also well established by J. M. Synge himself in these lines from his little poem entitled "The Curse":[1]

Lord, this judgment quickly bring,
And I'm your servant, J. M. Synge.

Synge's remote English ancestry may explain in some degree the hostility of certain Irish critics who insist that his views and opinions of Ireland are prejudiced. Yet in spite of what Irish critics and books of peerage may say, we can rest assured that Synge was a real Irishman.

Synge's father died in 1872, but we cannot say that his death affected his son's life in any great degree. In fact, it doesn't seem that Synge's home life greatly affected him at all. Synge was just a weak child who seems to have been neglected at home. His schooling was rather desultory. He attended private classes in Dublin and in Bray, but was taken from school at fourteen, and read with a tutor till he was ready to enter Trinity. We know very little of these early years. It does seem, however, that even at this time Synge was a lonely child as later he was to be a lonely man. This was probably due to his being the youngest child, and being thrown so much upon his own resources. Synge disliked companionship during these years, and preferred solitary rambles in the Dublin mountains just as later he loved lonely rambles in out of the way places. He loved nature. In the course of his rambles he got to know County Wicklow so well that there wasn't a nook for miles around that he didn't recognize. This intense love of nature greatly influenced Synge in his later life and works.

At a little later age, Synge suddenly developed a taste for music. He studied it seriously for some time, and even thought of

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[1] J. M. Synge: Complete Works, Vol.II, page 27

taking it up as a vocation. Although he never did that, music always remained one of his fondest avocations, and during his frequent visits to the Aran Islands he often tells us that he played for the amusement of the natives there.

At Trinity College, Dublin, where Synge entered in June, 1888, and received his B. A. degree in 1892, he studied languages. Synge had some reputation as a linguist. He received prizes in Irish and Hebrew at college in 1892. Some critics say that Synge's almost Biblical style may be traced to this study of Hebrew. That may be quite possible, although it seems that the point is open to debate.

But while we are discussing Synge's versatility, we must not fail to mention that he also seriously considered taking up painting for a while. For many years he was a member of the United Arts Club in Dublin. The brief descriptions that one finds in his plays are illustrative of the effect this training had on Synge's writing. Let us take, for example, this description from his play "In the Shadow of the Glen":

> Is it myself, lady of the house, that
> does be walking round in the long nights,
> and crossing the hills when the fog is on
> them, the time a little stick would seem
> as big as your arm, and a rabbit as big
> as a bay horse, and a stack of turf as big
> as a towering church in the city of Dublin?[1]

We could have chosen any number of such examples from Synge's works as equally indicative of his genius in description. This example, however, will suffice. The true artist is apparent here in his choice of words and setting.

After his graduation from Trinity, Synge felt the potentialities within him, but he was rather bewildered. This feeling pro-

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[1]Synge: Works, 1 14

bably influenced him to travel abroad in order that he might learn to know himself and his life work. Many critics attribute Synge's years of wandering merely to the tramp instinct within him. The real reason is perhaps more simple. It was especially fashionable at this time for promising young men to perfect themselves by traveling on the continent. This was particularly true of Irishmen, who seem to have a passion for leaving their native land. So, like Wilde and Borrow and so many others of his country men, Synge spent the next few years in continental travel. We shall deal of the influence of these travels in a moment. Let it suffice to say here, that Synge had to return to Ireland again before he really found himself.

Synge first went to Germany on leaving College. Here he intended to perfect himself in music, which, we will recall, he had already studied, obtaining a scholarship in harmony and counterpoint in 1891 from the Royal Irish Academy of music. Synge spent thirteen months in Germany, and then he altered his plans and went to France. Here he settled in Paris and began the serious study of French Literature, intending to make of himself a critic of that literature. This was in 1895. For the next few years, Synge's time was mostly divided between France and Ireland (Aran, Dublin, Wicklow). While in Paris, Synge joined the Irish clique known as "L'Association Irlandaise". Here he met other young Irishmen, members of the same club given over to things Irish, and it is perhaps here that the spark of nationalism was kindled within him. In 1896, Synge visited Italy for some four months. While there, he managed to learn some Italian, read the Italian classics, and, as he tells us in his essay "On the Road", see Pope Leo XIII.[1] Synge was writing during all these years, but little, if any of his material, was published. His writing habits are, however, worthy of notice. Synge used to write between

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[1]Synge: Works, IV 21

ten and twelve o'clock in the morning, always using an old fashioned portable typewriter. He would write whole acts of his plays over and over again as a whole, but he wouldn't revise the parts. After its first presentation, however, Synge wouldn't change a line in any of his plays. Synge wrote some critical works for several publications at this time, but without any marked success. His income was only about 40 pounds, so he quite often found it necessary to swell this sum a little by hack work. Yet it must be added, that so far as we know, Synge never suffered hardship during his wanderings. Some biographers are inclined to regard these years as years of terrible privation. There seems to be little evidence for making such a statement. Synge was not rich, it is true, but it is equally true that he didn't have to play the flute in order to beg a few pennies for his meals.

It was in March, 1908, in Paris, that Synge first met Mr. William Butler Yeats, one of the principal initiators of the Irish Literary Renascence. We cannot possibly overemphasize the importance of this meeting. It was the turning point in Synge's career. Had Synge not met Yeats, he would probably have gone on writing indifferently good criticisms in Paris. As it was, Yeats pointed out to Synge just what his vocation in life was to be. Yeats had a faculty for detecting literary genius, and setting it in the right path. He saw the possibilities within Synge, and advised him to give up Paris and Racine and criticism, and go live with the common people on the Aran Islands where life was still new and primitive. Yeats said to Synge: "Give up Paris; you will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people

themselves; express a life that has never found expression."[1] Yeats himself had just come from a stay on Aranmore, and he had been tremendously impressed by the life there. Synge took the advice. He paid his first visit to the Aran Islands in May 1898, staying there six weeks. It is not too much to say that Synge found himself in Ireland. In his essay "In West Kerry" he says:

> One wonders in these places why anyone is left in Dublin, or London, or Paris, when it would be better, one would think, to live in a tent or hut with this magnificent sea and sky, and to breathe this wonderful air, which is like wine in one's teeth.[2]

And the Wicklow peasant is what one finds in all of Synge's plays. Synge, after his initial visit, was a frequent visitor to the Islands. The primitive life on Aran affected him greatly, as we shall see later on in a discussion of his essays. In Aran and his Irish travels, Synge found three things which moulded his later work: linguistic interest, folk lore interest, and dramatic interest. The formative years, the wander years, were now over. Synge had found his métier. From the observations he collected in his notes, taken down during his visits here, his plays were to have their birth.

But let us digress for a moment. We hear a great deal of the French influence on Synge's work. That influence is more apparent than real. It may be worth while at this time to look into this question a bit. There is no doubt that Synge was widely read in French Literature. He did not, however, know any of the authors personally as did Wilde, or Yeats, or George Moore. Synge's interest lay especially in Old French Literature. He had read Charles d'Orléans, Colin Musset, Marot, Villon, and Ronsard, among the poets. This reading, however, rather illustrates Synge's habit of exploring

1 W. B. Yeats: The Cutting of an Agate, page 37
2 Synge: Works, IV 68

out-of-the-way nooks in literature than any personal influence in his work. Synge, in the same way, was widely read in the minor Elizabetheans: Nash, Beaumont, Greene, Peele, Marston. He may have got his bitter sweet masculine humor here, but the influence was no more personal than that. Synge was also equally well read in modern French Literature, contrary to the belief of most critics. He admired Beaudelaire, and thought Loti one of the greatest living writers of prose. Yet for all this, one cannot say that these influences went any deeper than a casual acquaintanceship. To say that Synge borrowed his plots from any of these sources is only to show a willful ignorance of the material gathered in Synge's prose writings. Synge's alleged morbidity is also ascribed to the influence of Beaudelaire. But again, this is a bit fanciful. A much simpler reason seems to be Synge's own ill health and lonely youth.

But what of all these foreign influences? Did they affect Synge at all? Did they make him any less Irish? Bourgeois says: "He was one of the few Irish writers who Europeanized Ireland without degaelicizing it." [1] And Bourgeois appears to be right in his judgment. Synge's foreign travels enabled him to make his characters Irish plus Universal, but they did more than that. They purged his eyes to a large degree of provincial prejudices. His foreign travels taught him that Ireland was not merely a dirty, unkept, disreputable island, infinitely inferior to England, but a nation, that in spite of its uncouthness, was none the less a real nation, with all that that implies. And this to Synge was a revelation. His eyes were cleared of the fog of prejudice that obscured the eyes of other expatriate Irish authors. Let us note here in passing, that Synge was

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[1] Bourgeois: Synge and the Irish Theatre, page 63

also fortunate in going directly to the continent. He did not stop off at London. If he had, those prejudices might so have crystalized as never to have left him. But no, Synge went directly to the continent. There, not only did he lose his prejudices, but he also had lit within him the flame of nationalism. Europe gave him a feeling for the local. Once he was to return to Ireland, that feeling was to burst into flame. And Synge did become a nationalist, even if he did not announce that fact from the housetops. This is one of the great clues to an adequate understanding of Synge's work. It makes all the difference between what he wrote before he went to Aran and after. If one doubts this feeling of nationalism within him, listen to what he says of an eviction on Aran: "When the anchor had been thrown it gave me a strange throb of pain to see the boats being lowered, and the sunshine gleaming on the rifles and helmets of the constabulary."[1] Synge was not an extremist, and we have come to associate that with Irishmen. Let us not, however, overlook his real feeling of nationalism for all that. Mr. Steven MacKenna, one of Synge's closest friends has to say about this matter:

> As regards political interest, I would die for the theory that Synge was most intensely Nationalist; he habitually spoke with rage and bitter baleful eyes of the English in Ireland, though he was proud of his own remote Englishry; I take it he wanted as dearly as he wanted anything, to see Ireland quite free; but one thing kept him quiet--he hated publicity, co-operation and lies. He refused to support the Gaelic League because one pamphlet it issued contained the statement (I indicate roughly) that to know modern Irish was to be in possession of the ancient Saga.[2]

For further proof, one has only to read the pages of "The Aran Islands."

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1 Aran Islands, III 85

2 D. Corkery: Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, page 46

Those pages were written by a patriot and a nationalist. But even this proof is not necessary. We have only to recall that Synge was interested enough to learn Irish in order that he might converse with the peasants. When a man learns a language in order to be able to live with the people, to feel like them, to think like them, therein lies, what one might consider an almost sufficient proof of nationalistic interest. We have lingered on this point because it is so significant. When Synge rediscovered Ireland, he also discovered in himself a passion. He wanted to interpret this folk. It was something that had never been done before. Synge wanted to do for the Irish what Loti had done for the Breton fishermen in his "Pêcheur d'Islande". Synge realized his limitations and bemoaned them, but his efforts remain the efforts of a man not precocious, not erudite, but a man who loved nature and the open road, a man emotional rather than intellectual, yet a man intensively alive.

But perhaps a portrait of the man may be in order at this point. Synge is always described as a soft spoken, shy mannered man; a spectator on life, a man who liked to study people in quiet. He is described in the following manner by Padaic Colum:

> His face was grey; had kindly hazel eyes, and he wore with his moustache a little chin tuft; his brow went up steeply, and he had strong hair that was neither black nor brown. In a way he was like Fritz Kreisler--less couth, less vivacious, wearing rougher clothes, but still as like as a brother might be who had gone, not on to the platform, but into the study. [1]

Mr. Anatole le Braz describes him in his diary as follows:

> La figure de Synge est typique: une tête longue, un peu carrée, aux traits tourmentés, et, par moments, quasi douloureux,

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[1] P. Colum: Road Round Ireland, page 357

> pas belle, mais singulièrement expressive. La moustache châtaine voile à demi les lèvres épaisses; une manière de goître enfle le côté droit du cou. Il se montre d'une courtoisie charmante, pleine d'aménité, de douceur, légèrement timide. L'intelligence est ouverte, accueillante. [1]

And finally, Mr. Yeats says of him: "He was a solitary, undemonstrative man, never asking pity, nor complaining, nor seeking sympathy, but in this book's momentary cries: all folded up in brooding intellect, knowing nothing of new books and newspapers, reading the great masters alone." [2] And it is as a solitary brooding man that one remembers Synge best. His boyhood was spent in wandering over mountain and bog in Wicklow. Of his later wanderings in Germany before he settled in France all Mr. Bourgeois can say is:

> He was the guest of some ladies living on the banks of the Rhine, and is said to have led a free, unconventional life in those days, listening to stories in the Harz and the Bavarian woods, making friends with servants and poor people, and more than once sleeping out under a hedge or in a farm or hay loft. [3]

Here again we see the typical Synge. Of his life in Paris we know little. It seems that here he could not give such free play to his tramp instincts. His life in Paris is not, however, typical. Synge was not to find expression till he found himself, and as we have said before, that metamorphosis occurred in the Aran Islands.

But let us first finish this sketch of his life. Death was constantly stalking him. Some cancerous disease had attacked him in his youth. Subsequent attacks followed, and Synge was sent to the Elpis Private Hospital. He came out in May, 1908, thinking he was cured. At this time he was working on his play "Deirdre of the

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1 M. Bourgeois: Synge and the Irish Theatre, page 65
2 W. B. Yeats: Cutting of an Agate, page 145
3 M. Bourgeois: Synge page 18

Sorrows." But real tragedy had him in its grip. He was soon back in the hospital. During his last illness he was as quiet as a baby, and he gained the love of all who knew him. The day before he died he destroyed many letters and poems. Then, on March 24, 1908, at five o'clock in the morning, he said to the nurse: "It is no use fighting death any longer." [1] With these words he died, - untimely, at 38. Bourgeois seems to think his work was done: Cockery thinks not. It is of course impossible to say, but considering the slow maturing of his genius, it seems quite probable that the world suffered a great loss by his too early death.

Synge and the Abbey Theatre

It is time now to consider Synge's connection with the Abbey Theatre School. Before doing so, however, it might be wise to consider the Irish dramatic movement before Synge. In the first place, we must recognize that there had been no real Irish drama for centuries. There are many reasons to account for this, but we need not consider them all. Suffice it to say that Ireland, living thru real drama all this time, had neither the time nor the desire for drama of the imagination. As Bourgeois says, play activity couldn't exist in Ireland so long as drama and life were one and the same thing. It was inevitable, however, that Irish drama should awake; and its awakening, in the Irish literary movement, was a nationalistic thing. Ireland finally realized that it could become free only by educational means, by raising the mass intellect. Hence the literary movement of which the drama was an integral part. There is first the Gaelic drama. Plays in the Irish language had been written for some time, and they continued to be written. We need not consider them here as

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[1] M. Bourgeois: Synge and the Irish Theatre, page 235.

we are interested mainly in Anglo-Irish literature. We may say in passing, however, that this drama has been primarily educational and propagandist in aim, and has had little literary value. Dr. Douglas Hyde, Canon O'Leary, Fr. Dineen, etc. have written good plays in Gaelic. But the better plays written for the Irish National Theatre have been in English.

The history of the modern Anglo-Irish dramatic movement goes back only about a generation. In 1899, W. B. Yeats, Edward Martyn, George Moore, and Lady Gregory founded the Irish National Theatre in Dublin under the auspices of the National Literary Society (created in 1891). As the name of the theatre may imply, the plays had to be "literary". Secondly, the plays had to be Irish in substance, and written for Irish people. The Theatre's purpose was avowedly national but not money making. At the opening performance, May 8, 1899, was presented Mr. Yeats' "The Countess Cathleen". English players were used, as it was impossible to secure Irish ones. The play was alleged to be Anti-Catholic, and feeling ran so high that the police had to be brought in. This particular difficulty was not experienced with subsequent plays, but the experiment nevertheless remained a failure. The English actors proved an incubus not to be lightly overcome, and the plays presented still proved to be continental rather than Irish. The Theatre lasted only three years.

But about this time, Mr. Frank J. Fay, an actor, and his brother actor, William G. Fay, conceived the idea of forming a company of Irish born actors to present Irish plays. So, on April 2, 1902, Mr. W. G. Fay's Irish National Dramatic Co. gave its first performance at St. Teresa's Hall in Clarendon St., Dublin. Two plays were given, Mr. George W. Russel's play "Deirdre", and Yeats' patriotic one-

act play "Kathleen ni Houlihan". This Irish National Dramatic Co. succeeded, and moved to permanent quarters at the Antien Concert Rooms. With the continued success of the company, the name was changed to the Irish National Theatre Society. The first president was W. B. Yeats, and the company's headquarters were established at Molesworth Hall, Camden St., Dublin. There were first performed two of Synge's plays: "In the Shadow of the Glen" and "Riders to the Sea" (Oct. 8, 1903, and Feb. 25, 1904).

In 1904, Miss A. E. F. Horniman, an Englishwoman, not only gave to the Irish National Theatre Society a small annual subsidy, but undertook at her expense the renovation of the old theatre of the Mechanic's Institute in Abbey Street, Dublin. She lent this theatre, rent free, to the society for six years. The renovation of the Abbey Theatre was the work of Irish hands, in spite of the fact that the bequest had an English origin. The Abbey Theatre is now a fixture in Ireland's dramatic renascence. It is still in its infancy, yet its influence has been and is immense and far reaching; witness the performances of the company in this country in 1911 and again this year in 1932. The manners of the Abbey Theatre Players are peculiar. Simplicity is the keynote. The actors not speaking make themselves inconspicuous. They don't fuss. This applies in general to all the actors. When an actor gives his lines he stands still. There is no pacing and arm-waving. Likewise, there are no stars in the company; the aim of the actors, to put it plainly, is to show off the play rather than themselves. The Abbey Theatre itself is small, seating only 562 persons. Consequently, loud voices do not have to be used. The actors, at first, were simple Dublin artisans who acted after work without pay, merely for their own enjoyment. That of course is

when Synge came to the Abbey Theatre. He became identified

changed now. But such were the conditions with Yeats and Lady Gregory in the direction of the Abbey Theatre from its opening, Dec. 27, 1904. Synge, in the theatre, was loved for his kind and gentle ways. He was not interested in the financial affairs of the company. His interest lay in the staging and directing of plays. Synge was a careful producer, and before his plays were presented to the public he had them perfected as he wanted them. Once Synge identified himself with the Abbey Theatre group, his plays followed calmly and deliberately. Still, we must make this point clear. Synge was not in any sense a product of the Abbey Theatre. He was simply caught up by it. He merely found in Dublin a stage, actors, and an audience for his plays. Very naturally, he used them. That is all.

Synge the Dramatist

But the time is now come to consider Synge as a dramatist. We have looked into his inheritance, into his life, and into his working world. Let us now, bearing these things in mind, consider Synge as a writer, -- a dramatist. This we shall first do in a general way; then, more specifically, we shall study his separate plays in detail.

Synge's theory of art is summed up in three short prefaces which are as economical and sufficient as are his stage directions. Two of these prefaces we find in his book of plays, the third in his books of poems. These three prefaces, taken together, elucidate Synge's whole work and idea of literature. And Synge was one of those rare creatures who practice what they preach. Each preface, in its way, defends the work which it opens, and in them Synge proves himself a master critic, - a quality rare in a creative artist. Let us first consider the preface to "The Playboy of the Western World", dated January 21, 1907. In this preface, Synge defends chiefly the use of "rich and copious language".

Synge goes on to tell us that "on the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy." This is possible in Ireland, where life is still unspoiled, as it is possible in few other parts of the world. Synge also tells us in this preface: "All art is a collaboration." He tells us how he used to pick up words and phrases from the people he met and how he incorporated them in his plays. That, we are given to understand, is what he means by collaboration.

In the second preface, that to "The Tinker's Wedding", dated December 2, 1907, Synge maintains that the drama is serious in so far as it gives us the nourishment on which our imagination lives. He utters a protest against the didactic problem plays in this same preface, and says: "The drama like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything." Synge then goes on to defend humor as being one of those factors which feeds and nourishes the imagination.

In his third preface, that to his book of "Poems and Translations", dated December 1908, Synge utters a plea for the exaltation of the common things in life. He says: "The poetry of exaltation will be always the highest, but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops". Further on, Synge says: "It may also be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal."

Synge's idea of literature and drama was then, as Cockery summarizes it: "An imaginative treatment of the profound and common interests of life so that exultation might result." [1] Synge was thus opposed to the mystical lyricism of the Yeatsian drama, and the sociological and psychological plays of Mr. Edward Martyn and George Moore.

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[1] D. Cockery: Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, page 67

Synge would bring the poetic drama of one to earth. The social drama of the other, he would enliven with imagination. In short, Synge wanted reality. He hated what he called artificial literature. As P. P. Howe says: he "reconciled life and literature, and brought back both to amicable cohabitation in the theatre". [1]

But let us look a little more closely into some of these ideas as expressed by Synge. Was he right, for example, when he said that literature should not attempt to teach or prove anything? Yes, if he meant teach in the narrow sense; no, in the larger. For great art cannot help teaching, as the object of teaching is improvement, and great art must, by its very greatness, improve us. We may then ask the very pertinent question: Do Synge's plays teach us, that is, improve us? I'm afraid the answer is not always yes. Synge had very little philosophy. He was a creature of moods, and his characteristic mood was one of viewing the world as a thing of grey mist. Consequently, the moment he escaped from this sense of greyness came his moment of exaltation, of imagination. Then, he wrote well; sometimes he even forgot himself and wrote "too" well, achieving the gaudy result we see in "The Tinker's Wedding." But then, if Synge does not teach us, is his work a great art? His work is art in the sense that while it does not feed our soul it does feed our imagination. It would be greater art if it did both; it is perhaps enough that it does one. Synge lived at an almost intolerable pitch of sensibility to life. His apprehension of beauty came as lightning flashes in his world of grey. These impressions he transferred fully charged and quivering to his plays, firing in turn our imagination as we see or read them. Synge is perhaps Synge because he yielded to his moods; yet, on the other hand, his work also suffers by his too great thralldom to these same

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[1] P. P. Howe: J. M. Synge, page 211

impulses.

Another thing to be lamented in Synge is his air of moral irresponsibility. This characteristic, however, is easily understood. Synge, when he went to the Aran Islands, was more profoundly influenced than he had ever been before. He saw a new life, and he tried to see it through the eyes of the people who lived there. But here he failed. He saw that these people liked such folk songs as he had come to know in Hyde's "Love Songs of Connacht". He saw they delighted in telling and hearing all sorts of wild folk tales. He saw them revel in wild bouts of coarse buffonery. So Synge thought he knew these people (as if one ever knows anyone else). And his sympathy with them was really deep; but Synge could see in them only what his mind enabled him to see. Of their spiritual environment he remained unconscious. Synge felt conscious of a void,--- that these people had something they couldn't share with him. He expresses this thought in "The Aran Islands", when he is left alone one Sunday, the people having gone to mass:

> I sat for nearly an hour beside the fire with a curious feeling that I should be quite alone in this little cottage. I am so used to sitting here with the people that I have never felt the room before as a place where any man might live and work by himself. After a while as I waited, with just light enough from the chimney to let me see the rafters and the greyness of the walls, I became indescribably mournful, for I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in it, have a peace and dignity from which we are shut for ever. [1]

So in this respect Synge failed. It is only in "Riders to the Sea" that he succeeds in sounding the spiritual depths of these people. In his other plays, he gives us a rather reckless wild-eyed view of them. It may be Synge's constitutional delicacy that led him to admire these

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[1] Synge: Works, III 200

coarser virtues, but it seems unfortunate for literature that he so seldom went beyond them.

But one may well ask how, with all these failings, Synge wrote as well as he is supposed to have written. The answer is simple. Synge's heart urged warmth into everything he wrote. There is always genuine emotion in his every line. The subject may be poor, the psychology may be lacking, but the human feeling is always present. Several of his ~~several~~ contemporaries possessed a keener intellect and a wider range of ideas, --none possessed a warmer heart or a more sympathetic feeling. That, in a nut-shell, is what distinguishes Synge from other Anglo-Irish authors of his time.

Having looked at Synge's attitude toward literature, and seen his relish for both imagination and reality, his neglect of ideas, and his liking for unmoral folk lore, one could almost guess what style of language he would use in writing. That language which he does use is composed of lyric phrases. At its best, it is perfect; but it is not always perfect. Some of Synge's phrases are too sugary sweet. They distract us rather than further the action of the play. This is especially true in "The Well of the Saints" and in "The Playboy of the Western World". One is often reminded of Gautier's phrase in reading these plays: "On chante ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit." One can readily understand how Synge, wrapped up in his work, aglow at having discovered a new land, could let slip by some of these too lyric phrases at rehearsal. But they do not slip by us in the theatre. They can be read and liked, even memorized; but their effect when spoken on the stage is entirely different. Drama demands unity of scene, not of word or phrase. What may be beautiful poetry may fall flat on the stage merely because its unity is too centralized. And this we say of Synge: he dealt too much with the words and not enough

with the scene. One has only to witness the performance of his plays to realize and feel the truth of this statement. Synge, however, occasionally forgets himself, and then he really produces a full-flavored speech. Take this, for example, from "The Playboy of the Western World":

> PEGEEN-- Standing beside him, watching him with delight.-- You should have had great people in your family, I'm thinking, with the little, small feet you have, and you with a kind of a quality name, the like of what you'd find on the great powers and potentates of France and Spain.
>
> CHRISTY--with pride.-- We were great surely, with wide and windy acres of rich Munster land.
>
> PEGEEN--Wasn't I telling you, and you a fine, handsome young fellow with a noble brow?
>
> CHRISTY--with a flash of delighted surprise.-- Is it me? [1]

This "Is it me?" is perfect, yet it is not lyric. Had Synge here yielded to his love of the lyric he would have spoiled the scene as he does in so many other instances. Fortunately, he did not. Synge's imagery is perfect. P. P. Howe says of him in this respect:

> With Synge's work spread before us, it is easy, one thinks, to see the whole in image. A simple small room holds it.....The room is never a vacuum, like Ibsen's; nor an aquarium, in which figures float intense but dim, like Maeterlinck's, or beautiful and recondite, like Mr. Yeats'; it is never a room into which we look from without. We are in the room. [2]

The opening scene of "In the Shadow of the Glen" or "Riders to the Sea" illustrate this characteristic. We enter the room with the tramp in the first play; we enter with Nora in the second. And once we have entered, we become a part of the scene, as much a part as the primary actors on the stage. Synge is likewise a master of the little

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[1] Synge: Works, II 29

[2] P. P. Howe: J. M. Synge, page 129

things in which lie real tragedy. For example, the door in "Riders to the Sea" is full of tragic import. Conchubor, in "Deirdre of the Sorrows", tells us volumes without saying a word when he examines the work box of Deirdre on entering the room. We are made to see him as a more appropriate father than lover. In "The Well of the Saints", Timmy takes Molly into the warm forge and closes the door on the tinker. The old man is going blind again. Here is illustrated very clearly the contrast between those "in" and those "out", a clever dramatic touch. All of these little touches are fine theatre technique. Synge has touches not only for the mind but also for the eye and ear. His touch for the ear is delicate. We hear the breathing of a cow, the coughing of a sheep in the mist, the rustle of a tramp in the ditch by the roadside. All these things make us feel ourselves in the play, give us a feeling of empathy. And yet all these touches are so light! It is interesting to note that there is not a firearm discharged in any of Synge's plays. His feeling for action was much too subtle for that. Again, it is the imagination which is fed. Synge allows us to make our own reality to suit ourselves.

The speech of the plays is perhaps the most obvious of their beauties. The language used is like that of the Bible in its grandeur and simplicity. Synge put a wistfulness and passion of his own into the speech of the Irish peasants. The result is a dialect that possesses literary values it is difficult to overestimate. Synge's dialect is really old Gaelic in English form. It is not difficult to understand, although many of the constructions are definitely Gaelic. The principal quality of this dialect is its rhythm. Synge attached great importance to cadence. We find him training his actors to recite words with just the right intonation and lilt. In fact, Synge probably overdid his blank verse rhythm. There isn't a single character we can trust not

to break out into poetry, incongruous as it may seem in that character. Take, for example, Old Mahon. He is hardly a noble character, yet Synge has him "picking cockles till the hour of death". [1] Now the Irish are naturally poetic, and we could excuse some of these rhapsodies, but not all of them. Synge has a set of favorite expressions which, to tell the truth, he works to death. We may cite: the hour of death, the dawn of day, the dead of night, the noon of May, the fogs of dawn, etc., etc. The too frequent use of gaudy adjectives and full endings does become at times serious. Imagine the Playboy saying all this in one breath in the height of passion: "If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl." [2] This passage rings false, because it is not the language of passion. Passion speaks briefly and has done. This "wailing grace", as Thomas Beer would describe it, at times slows down the action of the play almost to a standstill. Synge, however, rid himself of this note in his later plays.

One has only to compare Synge's peasant speech to that of other Anglo-Irish authors to see how far superior it is to any contemporary attempts. For sheer beauty and Biblical style take this sentence from "Deirdre of the Sorrows": "I have put away sorrow like a shoe that is worn out and muddy, for it is I have had a life that will be envied by great companies." [3] Synge's indebtedness to his reading of the Elizabethan dramatists is shown in his use of the following words taken from his plays: inveigle, bedizened, pandied, leaguing, spancelled, selvage, dreepiness, etc. The final result of all these

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1 The Playboy, II 110
2 Ibid II 90
3 Synge: Works, II 91

gleanings was a synthesis that was Synge's own; a combination of styles Biblical, Elizabethan, and Gaelic, forming a language incomparably sweet and mellow. Synge, of course, made blunders. For example, he uses the Perfect--I've been--a thing which the peasants never do. He also uses "should", so the philologists tell us, in a manner the peasants do not. But these are only details. It is the final result we should consider, and of that we can do no better than quote the praise Mr. E. A. Boyd gives it. He says:

> It is evident that Anglo-Irish is to Synge a medium in which he has obtained absolute freedom; he uses it with the same effect as the Elizabethans used English. The savour and freshness of a language that is still unexploited, the wealth of imagery and the verbal magnificence of the Elizabethan tongue are felt and heard again in "The Playboy of the Western World". [1]

Synge's characterizations are fundamentally simple. Of the inner workings of the human mind he apparently knew little. One cannot imagine him writing a psychological novel, if indeed he could write a novel at all. His types are too boyish. There is nothing subtle about them. They suffer no mental nor spiritual pains like a Faust or a Hamlet. No, they merely live fleshly and quite happily if nothing interferes with their physical pleasures. Pegeen says in "The Playboy of the Western World": "I wouldn't give a thraneen for a lad hadn't a mighty spirit in him and a gamey heart." [2] And that is typical of all Synge's characters. They are all "gamey" and adventurous. Nora Burke is after poetry talk. Martin Doul and his wife in "The Well of the Saints" are as gamey as ever in spite of their years. In "The Playboy", could one find a more racy couple than Pegeen and Christy? while in "Deirdre of the Sorrows", Deirdre herself could be a fit sister to Pegeen just as Owen could be a fit brother to Christy. The same charac-

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[1] A. E. Boyd: Ireland's Literary Renaissance, page 327

[2] Synge: Works, II 60

ter pattern is repeated over and over again in all of the plays. The same tomboyish people tumble about with the same absence of any spiritual nature. In fact, from a reading of the plays, one would never suspect that the native Irishmen had any real religious feelings whatever. Synge ignores that factor completely, and paints his characters as pagan as the ancient Celts. M. Bourgeois has remarked on this fact, for it is quite noticeable. That Synge could so overlook the deeply religious and spiritual nature of the people he tried to represent is a positive indication that so far as character was concerned he dealt with externals. In this respect, "Riders to the Sea" stands apart. Synge caught the real religious feeling of the natives of Aran in this play. When old Maurya says: "May the Almighy God have mercy on Bartley's soul", [1] there is real emotion. It is something we feel rather than something we can explain, just as the spiritual can be felt but not defined. The old woman in "Riders to the Sea" is, however, characterless herself. Is this a blemish? Our answer is no! A play should touch the spirit. Strong character is essential to touch our feelings, but we question if it is so essential to move the spirit. There is something greater that counts more, and "Riders to the Sea", if not Maurya herself, has that something greater. When Synge wrote that play, Nature took the pen from his hand and guided it herself. The result was a play in that high plane which can overlook "character".

But now, let us consider a few non-Irish touches in Synge's otherwise very Irish drama. In the first place, his sardonic humor is not Irish. It is probably the result of his readings in the old French farces and fabliaux. Be its source what it may, the result is good. C. E. Montague says in his "Dramatic Values": "In his (Synge's) harsh, sane, earthen humour, biting as carbolic acid to slight minds,

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[1] Synge: Works 1 45

they find a disinfectant well worth having, at the lowest, in an ailing theatre". [1] And we find S. P. Sherman in his "On Contemporary Literature" comparing Synge to Anatole France in his pyrrhonic irony and homeless laughter.[2] This feature is worthy of note as a non-Irish touch, for while the typical stage Irishmen is imagined as being a jovial, happy-go-lucky sort of a fellow, his humor never becomes biting. Then too, Synge's non-religious view of life is also un-Irish. Synge is as pagen as the old Gaels. We have already remarked how he failed to sense the spiritual life of the people with whom he lived. Here we merely wish to add that he carried this lack of sensibility into his own life.

But while Synge had these non-Irish elements creeping into his work, he more than made up for them with his definitely Irish touches. To consider only the more important, he first brings out the Gaels' native imaginativeness. Imagination means more than real life to the Irish. Synge seizes upon this feature, and stresses it in all of his plays. This was quite in keeping with his theory of the function of literature and drama as we saw it stated in his prefaces. Then, in all of Synge's plays there is the Dream element versus Reality. Christy, for example, is really a sorry sort of fellow. He dreams himself to be a young blood. Martin Doul and his wife, blind and ugly as sin, imagine themselves magnificent creatures. In their case they can't even stand reality, and prefer blindness and their dreams to the too sharp light of actuality. And so we could go thru all of Synge's plays, finding the same thing true, the Gael's love of his dreams. But in our consideration we must not forget Synge's love of nature. Here again he shows himself the true Irishman. Synge has

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[1] C. E. Montague: Dramatic Values, page 15

[2] S. P. Sherman: On Contemporary Literature, page 196

an uncanny power of making us see nature thru deft little touches in his plays. Take these lines, for example, from "Deirdre": "It's here there'll be deer stirring and goats scratching, and sheep waking and coughing when there is a great wind from the north." [1] Synge's love of physical beauty is typically Irish, and is illustrated in all his plays. In fact, one could make the objection that he is too much occupied with physical beauty to see any other type of beauty. In every case, the motive force bringing Synge's men and women together is the physical attraction of beauty. This leads us to the consideration of love making in Synge's plays. The initiative, in every case, is taken by the woman. It is Pegeen who woos Christy, just as does the Widow Quin. It is really Nora who makes offers to Michael in "In the Shadow of the Glen," It is Sarah who demands to be married in "The Tinker's Wedding," And so it goes thru all the plays, the women always taking the initiative. This element, again, is typically Gaelic, and shows Synge as the true Irishman writing for Irishmen, in contradistinction with those Anglo-Irish authors who wrote for Englishmen.

Yet in this discussion of Synge as a dramatist, we cannot fail to be impressed by the thought that Synge would never have written his plays, never been a dramatist at all, if he hadn't gone back to Ireland. He saw life with a new and vivid intensity after his return there, and that is the cue to understanding his art. We cannot give too much credit to W. B. Yeats for advising Synge to leave Paris and go back to Ireland to write for the new national theater then in its infancy. This advice furnished just the impetus Synge needed, and enabled him to gather virgin material for his plays.

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[1] Synge: Works, II 72

This leads us to a consideration of Synge's prose works, his essays, if you will. These are carefully wrought note books of what he observed while living with the peasants in various parts of Ireland. In these books, "The Aran Islands" and "In Wicklow and West Kerry", Synge noted down the facts that he was later to embody in his plays. Here we learn what Synge meant by collaboration as he uses the word in his prefaces. In the essays we find the hints of plots, the incidents, the characters, and even phrases that Synge later made into drama. "The Aran Islands" especially is the mine from which we may dig the unpolished ore for the plays. But let us listen to what Synge himself has to say in his preface to "The Playboy of the Western World":

> It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother or his children. In Ireland, those of us who know the people have the same privilege. When I was writing "The Shadow of the Glen," some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. [1]

And that is what Synge meant by collaboration. But Synge did more than jot down words and phrases wherever he went. He added imagination to his observations, and the result was his plays. We shall show in considering the plays just how much they owe to the notebooks. It is our purpose here, however, to consider the essays for their intrinsic worth.

Synge's method of writing these essays was peculiar. Again he worked with the heart rather than with the intellect. We find him spending whole days lying on the rocks watching the sea and the clouds. He did not frequent the really authoritative people on the island;

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[1] Synge: The Playboy, II v

instead he listened to old lying beggars and drunkards. In other words, Synge impregnated himself with the "atmosphere" of the island. As a result, his essays are unique. They, in turn, give atmosphere, real atmosphere, and don't descend to being merely guide books with nice little tables and charts. We are given little actual information about the islanders, -- surprisingly little, yet before we have laid down the book we feel we know them. Such is the mysterious working of the heart.

It would be impossible to go on to describe these essays at greater length, and they are without doubt worthy of the time we should thus spend. We are here considering Synge as a dramatist, however, and the essays do not come directly under the heading of drama. Suffice it to say, that Synge's prose works show him to be the man we have tried to picture him up to this point; a man quivering with the excitement of life, a man seizing on a moment of beauty, a colorist, yes, even a sensationalist. Synge is all these things in his essays. But above all, he is the man preparing himself, the man gathering material he is to make such good use of later on in his plays. Still, we cannot dismiss these essays as mere notes; they are much more than that. In their way, they are as valuable as the plays that they engendered. We shall come across them again and again as sources for the plays that we shall consider later on. It may even be that these essays will live longer than the plays, but let us now turn to the plays in the light of these prose works.

The Plays

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

There is some question as to whether "In the Shadow of the Glen" was the first play written by Synge or not, but there is no question that it was the first to be performed. It was first produced by the Irish National Theatre Society at Molesworth Hall, October 8, 1903.

This play is, however, in spite of its priority in point of time, as much a part of Synge as anything he was to write later on. Lady Gregory in her book "Our Irish Theatre", tells us that the play was attacked by the Sinn Fein weekly newspaper when it was first played.[1] Synge was accused of having borrowed the plot from a decadent Roman source (the story of the widow of Ephesus), and given it an Irish setting. The objections were also made that the play was a bitter innuendo against the chastity of Irish home life, and that it was patterned on foreign models (the same theme of a dead man catching his unfaithful wife occurs in "Le Malade Imaginaire" and in "Zadig"). But both these accusations are false. There is no place where folk tales are told that this same story cannot be found in more or less the same form. Synge got it from old Pat Dirane, an islander with whom he used to practice Irish on the Aran Islands. The tale as told to Synge by Pat Dirane is given in "The Aran Island", and it is worthy of being reproduced in its entirety here in order to show what a real source book for Synge's plays his essays proved to be.

> One day I was travelling on foot from Galway to Dublin, and the darkness came on me and I ten miles from the town I was wanting to pass the night in. Then a hard rain began to fall and I was tired walking, so when I saw a sort of a house with no roof on it up against the road, I got in the way the walls would give me shelter.
>
> As I was looking round I saw a light in some trees two perches off, and thinking any sort of a house would be better than where I was, I got over a wall and went up to the house to look in at the window.
>
> I saw a dead man laid on a table, and candles lighted, and a woman watching him. I was frightened when I saw him, but it was raining hard, and I said to myself, if he was dead he couldn't hurt me. Then I knocked on the door and the woman came and opened it.
>
> "Good evening, Ma'am", says I.

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[1] Lady Gregory: Our Irish Theatre, page 129

"Good evening kindly, stranger", says she. Come in out of the rain."

Then she took me in and told me her husband was after dying on her, and she was watching him that night.

"But it's thirsty you'll be, stranger," says she. "Come into the parlour."

Then she took me into the parlour--and it was a fine clean house--and she put a cup, with a saucer under it, on the table before me with fine sugar and bread.

When I'd had a cup of tea I went back into the kitchen where the dead man was lying, and she gave me a fine new pipe off the table with a drop of spirits.

"Stranger," says she, "would you be afeard to be alone with himself?"

"Not a bit in the world, ma'am, "says I; "he that's dead can do no hurt."

Then she said she wanted to go over and tell the neighbprs the way her husband was after dying on her, and she went out and locked the door behind her.

I smoked one pipe, and I leaned out and took another off the table. I was smoking it with my hand on the back of my chair--the way you are yourself this minute, God bless you--and I looking on the dead man, when he opened his eyes as wide as myself and looked at me.

"Don't be afraid, stranger," said the dead man; "I'm not dead at all in the world. Come here and help me up and I'll tell you all about it."

He sat up then, and says he--

"I've got a bad wife, stranger, and I let on to be dead the way I'd catch her goings on."

Then he got two fine sticks he had to keep down his wife, and he put them at each side of his body, and he laid himself out again as if he was dead.

In half an hour his wife came back and a young man along with her. Well, she gave him his tea, and she told him he was tired, and he would do right to go and lie down in the bedroom.

The young man went in and the woman sat down to watch by the dead man. A while after she got up and "Stranger," says she, "I'm going in to get the candle out of the room; I'm thinking the young man will be asleep by this time." She went into the bedroom, but the devil a bit of her came back.

Then the dead man got up, and he took one stick, and he gave the other to myself. We went in and saw them lying together with her head on his arm.

The dead man hit him a blow with the stick so that the blood out of him leapt up and hit the gallery.

That is my story. [1]

In this version of the story, the narrator of the tale corresponds to

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[1] Synge: Works, III 57

the tramp in the play. Synge has actually transcribed some phrases literally from "The Aran Islands": "He that's dead can do no hurt." In fact, Synge added only a few details and changed the ending of the tale in his version.

But to return to the play itself, we can summarize it briefly to show its likeness to old Pat Dirane's story. It is a bitter sketch of the loveless marriages so common among the Irish country folk. An elderly man marries a young woman. He believes her to be unfaithful, and in order to verify his suspicions he pretends to be dead. The ruse works; the wife betrays herself by making plans to get married again and by talking of her former lovers. The husband, rising from his death bed, puts his wife out of the house. Synge omits the murder and the adultery of the original tale, and introduces the tramp. The first two changes perhaps any Irish author would have adopted; but the introduction of the tramp was characteristic of Synge. But of that change we shall deal more fully in considering the other sources of the play.

The play itself is Synge at his best and at his worse. P.P.Howe, for example, says this of the play: "There is no one act play in the language for compression, for humanity, and for perfection of form, to put near 'In the Shadow of the Glen'."[1] Now this is rather extravagant praise as we shall attempt to prove. The play is weak at the outset. Its theme is taken from folk lore. This is well and good. But we must remember that folk lore is interested in the story only as a story. It seeks and goes no further than to tell a good tale. But the method of the dramatist is entirely different. He is more interested in the inner development of his characters than in the outer frame of action. Hence, a certain looseness of aim in Synge's play. We scarcely know whether to call the play comic or tragic. It is both. As folk lore it was comic; as drama, it is painfully indefinite. To

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[1] P. P. Howe: Synge, page 47

take a concrete example, we may consider Nora Burke. One doesn't quite know what to think of this woman. Mr. Yeats says of Nora in the preface to the first edition of the play: "The players were puzzled by the rhythm, but gradually they became certain that this woman of the glens, as melancholy as a curlew, driven to distraction by her own sensitiveness, her own fineness, could not speak with any other tongue." [1] Now this is ridiculous. Nora may be melancholy, but Synge certainly failed to portray her as fine and sensitive when he has her speak in this strain: "What would I live, and I am old woman, if I didn't marry a man with a bit of a farm and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?" [2] And then, this fine, sensitive woman says of her man: "He's after dying on me, God forgive him, and there I am now with a hundred sheep beyond on the hills and no turf drawn for the winter."[3] Or would such a woman as Yeats considers count her gold before her lover, a man she knows to be earthly and weak? It does not seem so. In these respects, Nora is the naturalistic figure of folk tale. On the other hand, at times she does become really great in her melancholy as when she speaks of"..... looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and the mists again, and they rolling up the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain." [4] This melancholia conflicts with the mood of the play, and we find it as hard to understand as does Michael himself. The play is not long enough for such changes of mood, and there is no link between them.

The play is a good sketch, but Synge had not yet acquired his certainty of touch. The play shows evidence of not having been thought

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1 Preface to first edition of play
2 Synge: Works, 1 28
3 Synge: Works, 1 9
4 Synge: Works, 1 29

thru sufficiently. Nora, for example, a character Synge has been at pains to impress upon us as a typical peasant type, leaves with the tramp at the end of the play with but little apparent feeling. She takes to the road as if she had never been affected by the peasant's notorious love of peace and security. Yet this is the same woman who married Dan Burke for a quiet corner of land and cows on it. And all the way thru it is the same. When Nora returns with Michael she asks the tramp to leave the room. He refuses. Yet why should he refuse? He knows Dan can trap his wife much more easily if he leaves the room. Or, if on the other hand he wanted to warn and protect Nora, why did he let her in at all? The play is weakened by these uncertainties. Yet it has its merits. It is still Synge, and Synge at his best in parts. For example, the dramatic effect of the covered corpse occupying the center of the room is perfect. It leads to an air of suspense and expectancy that has in it the essence of real drama. It seems that Synge, even when he was bad, could not forget all his dramatic instincts.

We have said before that such changes as Synge made in the play were characteristic of him. This is quite true. The scene is laid in Wicklow, whether because Synge wanted to place the tramp there or whether his choice of the tramp led him to choose the place we do not know. But we do know of Synge's fondness for vagrants and their prevalence in Wicklow: witness "The Vagrants of Wicklow". Perhaps Synge saw in them an expression of poetic revolt against settled existence. For Synge's tramps are not ordinary tramps. The tramp in this play is perhaps the play's most noble figure. Synge's tramps are aristocrats. Listen to what he says on them in "The Vagrants of Wicklow":

> Yet in one sense it is an interesting sign,
> for wherever the labourer of a country has
> preserved his vitality, and begets an occa-
> sional temperament of distinction, a certain
> number of vagrants are to be looked for. In
> the middle classes the gifted son of a family

> is always the poorest--usually a writer or artist with no sense for speculation--and in a family of peasants, where the average comfort is just over penury, the gifted son sinks also, and is soon a tramp on the roadside. [1]

This paragraph helps us to understand, perhaps, why Nora went so readily with the tramp at the end of the play.

But the main importance of this play for us lies in the fact that it gives us a very good example of what Synge meant by play-making and collaboration. It illustrates his methods perfectly. We have gone to some lengths to show how Synge modeled his play on Pat Dirane's story. Yet his indebtedness to his note books, and consequently to his recorded observations, does not end there. The story of Patch Darcy, eaten by the crows, to take an example, is recorded in his essay "The Oppression of the Hills". [2] Then, the details about the herds and the ewes, and the men who could spot any sheep in a flock of five hundred is taken from the essay "At a Wicklow Fair". [3] Synge has the tramp ask Nora for a needle and thread as a charm before she leaves him alone with the dead man. In "The Aran Islands" we have the following passage: "Take a sharp needle and stick it in under the collar of your coat, and not one of them (fairies) will be able to have power on you". [4] And these are only a few examples that happen to be concrete. All of the essays are inherent in Synge's play. This is true not only of the play we are considering at this time, but of all the plays Synge ever wrote. We shall see illustrated again and again what collaboration meant to Synge in the plays that are to follow.

But before leaving the play let us now consider it as a work of art. The play is remarkable in that it lets us see, for half an hour, the life of four people, yet it opens up into years that have passed and years that are to follow. Synge was not particularly interested in

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1 Synge: Works, IV 1
2 Synge: Works, IV 12
3 Synge: Works, IV 40
4 Synge: Works, III 73

the outer frame of action in developing this play. There is little or no outward action, yet the figures remain arresting. Nora is perhaps the outstanding character. Of her, Bourgeois says: "The shattered ideals and thwarted aspirations of all humanity speak through her as she sits an inscrutably sad woman above the ruins of her world". [1] Nora is the young woman who is discontented with her lot in life and craves for poetry. Her real nature is first seen when she replies to the tramp that she is not afraid of him or any other living man. Lowering her voice, she admits that it is other things she's afraid of, - the desolate hills outside that are symbolic to her of her thwarted life. Nora saw romance in Patch Darcy. He was a young man. He passed by her house. Is it any wonder that she should become interested in him? Yet he too was afflicted; shall we say with aspirations? His thoughts and strivings became so unbearable that he had to run away in the hills. Mad, some would call him, but Nora knew better. There Patch was found eaten by the crows. And Nora settled down to lonesomeness again. Nora then thought she might find happiness with Michael. He too had youth. That, at least, was something that old Dan, her husband, couldn't offer her. But again she was destined to be disappointed. Michael proved to be only the shell of a man. He was interested in Nora only for her little pile of gold and her land. Even the tramp speaks to him contemptuously. Michael doesn't understand Nora. When she asks him what good the farm that Dan brought her is compared to the loneliness he brought with it, Michael can do no better than to say: "What is it ails you, this night, Nora Burke? I've heard tell it's the like of that talk you do hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills". [2] Then, while Nora is counting her gold, the idea of her wasted life still obsesses her. She says:

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1 M.Bourgeois: Synge, page 149
2 Synge: Works, 1 29

"Isn't it a long while I am listening here in the winter and the summer, and the fine spring, with the young growing behind me and the old passing".[1] But Michael isn't listening. His sensibilities are none too keen. He can see gold, but ideals have no place in his life. Nora again reveals her true character when Michael asks her to marry him. She really intends to do so, but she can't help thinking her lonely thoughts and expressing them thus: "Why would I marry you, Mike Dara? You'll be getting old and I'll be getting old, and in a little while I'm telling you, you'll be sitting up in your bed--the way himself was sitting".[2] Can anything be more pathetic? Nora's idealism has been completely shattered. She is willing to marry Michael, but she is not painting any idealized picture of her life with him. She has been touched by the spirit of the hills, and nothing now will ever be the same. The characters reveal themselves more fully when Dan jumps up from his death bed. For the first time the tramp really speaks. Next to Nora, he is the strongest character in the play. Heretofore he has been merely a spectator. Now he begins to play an active part. He remonstrates with Dan when the latter commands Nora to leave the house. He even suggests that Michael take her. But Nora knows Michael too well. She answers: "What would he do with me now?"[3] When the tramp fully understands the situation, he himself offers to take Nora away: "We'll be going now, lady of the house--the rain is falling, but the air is kind and maybe it'll be a grand morning by the grace of God".[4] Nora is too unsettled to be properly grateful. Yet the tramp wins her over. His nature, we are led to believe by speeches like these, is rather akin to her own: "Come along with me now, lady of the house,

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1 Synge: Works, 1 30
2 Synge: Works, 1 31
3 Synge: Works, 1 36
4 Synge: Works, 1 37

> and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but its fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear".[1]

Nora is persuaded and leaves with the tramp. We cannot help feeling that in spite of all, Nora will perhaps be more happy now. She has met a man with vision, and while her lot may be miserable physically, she will no doubt be more happy in her mind than she would have been with the too-old Dan or the too-dense Michael. We can dismiss these two with but a word. Dan is simply the husband too old for his wife. Michael is just a herd, too normal to appreciate the melancholy Nora. These two are well paired as they sit and drink at the end of the play.

RIDERS TO THE SEA

Synge was much happier in his choice of theme in "Riders to the Sea" than he was in "In the Shadow of the ~~Sea~~ Glen". In the latter play we saw an uncertainty of touch, due to the fact that the author was not in complete harmony with his subject. In "Riders to the Sea", we see no such uncertainty. Synge had come upon a theme that he responded to with every fibre in his body. He had lived with the natives on Aran long enough to come to feel as they felt about the malignity of the sea around them. The result of these associations was a one-act play that, for sheer intensity and genuine emotional feeling, has few equals in our language.

This play, perhaps more than any other, has its roots in "The Aran Islands," yet not in any specific incident. Boyd says, for example:

1 Synge: Works, 1 38

"It might be said to concentrate within a small space the essential spirit of that work, which is, at bottom, a narrative of the constant struggle of the islanders against their relentless enemy, the sea."[1] Just to show to what extent Synge used the material of his note books in shaping his plays, let us consider in some detail the sources of this play. The main incident, that of a man being found drowned in the sea, we find in "The Aran Islands" stated thus:

> Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pampooty on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.
>
> For three days the people have been trying to fix his identity. Some think it is the man from the south answers the description more exactly. To-night as we were returning from the slip we met the mother of the man who was drowned from this island, still weeping and looking out over the sea. She stopped the people who had come over from the south island to ask them with a terrified whisper what is thought over there.
>
> Later in the evening, when I was sitting in one of the cottages, the sister of the dead man came in through the rain with her infant, and there was a long talk about the rumors that had come in. She pieced together all she could remember about his clothes, and what his purse was like, and where he had got it, and the same for his tobacco box, and his stockings. In the end there seemed little doubt that it was her brother.
>
> "Ah!" she said, "It's Mike sure enough, and please God they'll give him a decent burial." [2]

Here is the germ of the story, yet how many incidents it already has in common with the finished play. The man found drowned had with him his purse and box of tobacco. In the play, the stage direction tells us that Bartley stops to get his purse and tobacco. The man here is identified by his clothes and his stocking, just as in the play Michael is identified by the stitches in his stocking. And finally, the closing sentence in this little sketch: "Ah! It's Mike sure enough, and please God they'll give him a decent burial." Compare this to Maurya's last speech in the play: "Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by

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1 E. A. Boyd: The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, page 95

2 Synge: Works, III 159

the grace of the Almighty God". [1] The idea here expressed, even the words used, are practically the same. We cannot fail to be impressed, as we go along, by the debt Synge owed to his notebooks, and consequently, to the islanders. We can trace the very title of the play to this selection taken from "The Aran Islands":

> When the horses were coming down to the slip an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn't say what she was after seeing, and this man caught the horse, he caught his own horse first, and then he caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned. [2]

As we go on, we see more and more clearly what Synge meant by collaboration, and his ability to practice what he preached. But let us go on with the evidence. Bartley, in the play, is buried in a coffin made of the white boards that had been bought to be Michael's coffin if he were ever found. In "The Aran Islands", we come across the following passage:

> The body of a young man who was drowned a few weeks ago came ashore this morning, and his friends have been busy all day making a coffin in the yard of the house where he lived.
>
> After a while the curagh went out of sight into the mist, and I came down to the cottage shuddering with cold and misery.
>
> The old woman was keening by the fire.
>
> "I have been to the house where the young man is", she said, "but I couldn't go to the door with the air was coming out of it. They say his head isn't on him at all, and indeed it isn't any wonder and he three weeks in the sea. Isn't it great danger and sorrow is over every one on this island?" [3]

Here again we have the story of a young man drowned. The episode of making the coffin is the new element here. Synge had probably seen such scenes enacted over and over again. His ability to dramatize what he had seen is eloquently shown in "Riders to the Sea". Then, in the play, Maurya also mentions that "..... when a man is nine days in the sea,

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1 Synge: Works, 1 45
2 Synge: Works, 111 204
3 Synge: Works, 111 194

and the wind blowing, it's hard set his own mother would be to say what man it was".[1] Compare this with our quotation above: "They say his head isn't on him at all, and indeed it isn't any wonder and he three weeks in the sea".

The incidents we have given above are directly incorporated in the play. The whole of "The Aran Islands" is, however, inherent in it. The whole book deals with the struggle of the islanders to wrest a living from the sea, just as the whole play deals with that same struggle between man and sea. Just to show how Synge felt these people were under the judgment of the sea we may qupte the following passage:

> As they talked to me and gave me a little poteen and a little bread when they thought I was hungry, I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgment of death. I knew that every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks, or would die in his own cottage and be buried with another fearful scene in the graveyard I had come from.[2]

And again, a passage that probably was uppermost in Synge's mind when he has old Maurya say in the play:

> In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.[3]

I have reference to the following passage from "The Aran Islands":

> The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women. Their sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or to live here in continual danger on the sea; their daughters go away also, or are worn out in their youth with bearing children that grow up to harass them in their own turn a little later.[4]

One could go on multiplying examples, but that is hardly necessary nor wise. As we have mentioned before, the whole book on the Aran Islands reeks with little incidents that have been incorporated in this play.

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1 Synge: Works, 1 40
2 Synge: Works, III 200
3 Synge: Works, 1 28
4 Synge: Works, III 113

Let us, however, as illustrative of the theme, quote just one more passage from "The Aran Islands":

> This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they are all doomed. [1]

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The play itself is short, in one act, and the story is as simple as the play is short. As the play unfolds itself we are given to understand that from time to time the father and five sons of the household have all been drowned. The fifth son, Michael, was drowned only nine days before the play opens, and his body has not yet been recovered. The two girls of the household have, however, been given a bundle of clothes got off a drowned man to identify them as their brother's. There is only one son now remaining, Bartley. He wishes to cross to the mainland to go to the fair; and altho the weather is bad he is not to be dissuaded by his mother, Old Maurya, who feels instinctively that disaster will overtake him if he goes. We feel as certain of this fact as does Maurya, and when Bartley leaves it is as under a shade. The rest of the story is simple. At dusk, Bartley's corpse is brought in from the sea. And there, in all its magnificent simplicity, is the story.

This play is the most Greek of all Synge's plays in the immensity of its issues and in its universal appeal. The inevitableness of the ending is typically Greek in character; but, while the ending is

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1 Synge: Works III 64

terrible, it leaves us with a new feeling of tenderness rather than any feeling of hardness. One feels purged, again a characteristic typically Greek. In comparing this play to a Greek play, one must not forget to mention the keening women, -- Synge's parallel to the Greek chorus.

The action of the play is swift, one might almost say reckless. Most tragic plays come to their height gradually after a certain preparation. This is, as a rule, a feat for the fifth act. You have been led up a staircase of rising emotional appeal. But this is not the case in "Riders to the Sea". Here you are taken straight into black tragedy. You step thru one door into darkness. And the play starts at the beginning, not five minutes later. P. P. Howe goes so far as to accuse Synge of having got so fierce a momentum in this play that the regard for time is burned up. Bartley is drowned and his body recovered all within the space of an half hour. The accusation is perhaps justified, but it seems a bit weak. Outside of this one debatable point, the play is technically perfect. Every speech plays its part and helps along the action. I believe the words of C. E. Montague better describe the play as an entity than does Howe's rather weak objection. Montague says: "To achieve lucidity in a short one-act tragedy is like carving the Commandments on a threepenny bit." [1] Yet Synge does this. But Weygandt also takes objection.[2] He says the play is spoiled for him by the technical imperfection of crowding into it incidents that took far longer in the happening than in their portrayal on the stage. The play, however, speaks for itself, and it seems to me that both Howe and Weygandt have an improper conception of drama. Drama, by its very nature, can come into being only when men are moved powerfully and suddenly to record the happenings of life.

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1 C. E. Montague: Dramatic Values, page 9
2 C. Weygandt: Irish Plays and Playwrights, page 178

Drama again, by its very nature, is a speedy form of narrative. It is impatient with slower forms of literature, and to accuse Synge's play of moving faster than life itself is like accusing a man of acting faster than he can write. But as we said before, the play speaks for itself. Naturally, a man's actions are more rapid than his recorded observations of them.

The play is awe-inspiring because its protagonist, the sea, is awe-inspiring. In this play, the sea becomes a portent. It symbolizes the struggle between man and nature. The fisherfolk do not rail against it. It is too familiar ~~too familiar~~ to them for that. They merely accept it as a reality of life. To them, the sea is nothing new, nothing strange. It is always spoken of as "the sea". Never do we find an adjective, nor a synonym used. Synge was always fond of understatement. Throughout this play he obtains his effect by that means. We are made to imagine a malign force, and in imagining it we increase its actual horror. Synge's method of making us visualize Old Maurya as the universal mother is equally well done. He does not describe her, but merely thru her words, simple yet big, we are made to see her in all her Demeter-like greatness. Her words at the end of the play are magnificent. "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me." [1] Here, Old Maurya shows her bigness, her mature philosophy, if you will. The words are not callous; they are merely the only words a tired old woman could use. There was no use railing, no use whining. The end had come, but life had to go on; life would go on, but Maurya was tired, as Cathleen said. A little later we come upon an even greater peace, the calmness of despair. Maurya says:

> Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No

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1 Synge: Works, 1 42

> man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied. [1]

These words leave us thrilled, leave us better. Just as Maurya felt purified, so do we. There is an immensity here that words cannot describe. We have mentioned before that Synge failed to realize the spiritual greatness of the people with whom he dealt. In this play, he expresses that greatness. We can add little to that statement of fact. Spirituality is a feeling, a feeling that may be induced by words but is nevertheless apart from them. We can perhaps best convey our meaning by saying that after reading this play our natural feeling is to utter very reverently, Amen.

As a work of drama the play is almost perfect. Each little incident, each little move of the characters, each little bit of stage setting has its part in the furtherance of the plot. From the moment Bartley leaves the house we know he will not return. It is this sense of inevitableness that is the richest source of tragic emotion in the play, and it is to this end that everything works. We are prepared subtly for stark realism. Note how the bundle of clothes is used. It is brought in at the beginning of the play, our attention is focused on it, yet we are not satisfied. The bundle is hidden from us, and when it is opened later on our eyes strain to see what it contains. And there are dozens of such incidents that fill us with awe and anxiety. A gust of wind blows open the door; the turf for the fire in the corner has to be replenished; the white boards lean against the kitchen wall; the dropped stitches in the stocking are counted. All these things in themselves are trifles, yet taken cumulatively they furnish wonderful preparation for the stark realism that is to follow. Take, for example, the opening lines of the play. Nora asks in a low voice:

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1 Synge: Works, 1 45

"Where is she?"[1] Cathleen answers: "She's lying down, God help her, and may be sleeping, if she's able." [2] Notice how we are immediately made aware of the great sufferings Maurya has already undergone, and how we are prepared to accept the even greater sorrow she is now to undergo. Or take the scene where Bartley's corpse is brought in. We have been mentally set for this procession by the account Maurya has just given us of another such drowning. No sooner has she made us visualize the scene by her description of it, than we see it actually enacted before us on the stage. The dramatic effect is now naturally increased twofold. Synge's fatalism in this play has been called pagan, but it seems to me that to make such a statement is to miss the point of the play entirely. It is true that fate is pictured as being irresistible, but Old Maurya is not overcome by it. The end of the play finds her resigned, it is true, but she is not broken, -- she has been purified by her great suffering. There is nothing of the pagan in this doctrine. Rather than saying this is the most pagan of Synge's plays, I should call it the most profoundly christian in its implications. Is there a pagan note in these last words of Maurya?

> May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn (bending her head); and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world. [3]

With these very words, Maurya proves herself bigger than fate. She has been tried, but she has not yielded. The true greatness of man lies in that strength, just as the true greatness of this play lies in its representation on the stage.

There seems very little divergence of opinion in calling "Riders to the Sea" one of the greatest of Synge's plays as well as one of the greatest tragedies of modern times. Edward J. O'Brien, in the intro-

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1 Synge: Works, 1 17
2 Synge: Works, 1 17
3 Synge: Works, 1 45

duction to the play, says: "The pity and the terror of it all have brought a great peace, the peace that passeth understanding, and it is because the play holds this timeless peace after the storm which has bowed down every character, that "Riders to the Sea" may rightly take its place as the greatest modern tragedy in the English tongue." [1] This is not extravagant praise. Other critics go farther in praising the work; few are not moved profoundly by it. And the reason is not far to seek. Drama is supposed to be made of action, not words; but "Riders to the Sea" is made of both actions and words. Consequently, it is not only drama, but great drama. Few dramatists can so use words as to convey ideas without leaving a bad taste of the words behind to detract from the idea. Synge achieves this difficult task in the play. Notice how the words in the following quotation retire discreetly into the background to let us see Maurya's idea:

> I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. [2]

These words fire our imagination and move our spirit. In this respect "Riders to the Sea" is a play apart. It is fundamental. Compared to it, "The Playboy" seems loud, and none of the other plays, with the exception of "Deirdre" approach it for mastery of touch and sympathy of feeling.

Cockery believes there is only one other theme in Synge's notebooks that would have been capable of stirring him as deeply as this theme stirred him, and that is the tale embodied in these lines:

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1 Synge: Works, 1 1
2 Synge: Works, 1 42

> She belonged to one of the most primitive families on the island, and she shook with uncontrollable fury as she saw the strange armed men who spoke a language she could not understand driving her from the hearth she had brooded on for thirty years. For these people the outrage to the hearth is the supreme catastrophe. They live here in a world of grey, where there are wild rains and mists every week in the year, and their warm chimney corners, filled with children and young girls, grow into the consciousness of each family in a way it is not easy to understand in more civilized places.
>
> The outrage to a tomb in China probably gives no greater shock to the Chinese than the outrage to a hearth in Inishmaan gives to the people.
>
> When the few trifles had been carried out, and the door blocked with stones, the old woman sat down by the threshold and covered her head with her shawl.
>
> Five or six other women who lived close by sat down in a circle round her, with mute sympathy. Then the crowd moved on with the police to another cottage where the same scene was to take place, and left the group of desolate women sitting by the hovel. 1

Here is embodied the germ of a story that might have moved Synge to another masterpiece. Unfortunately he did not deal with it, so "Riders to the Sea" still remains the highest expression Synge ever succeeded in creating to express the soul of the Aran Islands.

THE TINKER'S WEDDING

"The Tinker's Wedding" was one of Synge's first plays. Mr. Masefield says that it was Synge's first attempt at dramatic writing, and this is probably true. Synge worked on this play for a time, and then left it. It is quite probable that he finished "In the Shadow of the Glen" and "Riders to the Sea" before he came back to it again. Be that as it may, the critics have not been very kind to this play. Some of them go so far as to say that it might have been better if Synge had never come back to it. And that is to some degree our feeling. The play is weak, one of the weakest things Synge ever did. To begin with, the theme is hardly sufficient to support two acts. Then, the subject

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1 Synge: Works, III 86

and the treatment it receives is hardly pleasant or elevating. "The Tinker's Wedding" is the only one of Synge's plays that has never been produced in Ireland. The reason for that will become apparent as we consider the play in more detail.

The plot is simple. As the play opens, we find Sarah Casey, a young tinker woman, rather anxious to get married to her tinker lover, Michael Byrne. The reason for this sudden desire on her part is not quite clear. The couple have been living together more or less happily for years, but it is only now that Sarah feels the urge to be properly married by a priest. Michael consents grudgingly. The young couple meet the priest and bargain with him over the fee which he will demand to marry them. At last, the fee is fixed upon at ten shillings plus the new tin can on which Michael is working. The ceremony is to take place the following morning. While Michael and Sarah go off to plunder the neighboring henneries, Mary Byrne, Michael's mother, steals the tin can and goes off to exchange it for drink. She replaces the can with empty porter bottles. The next day, the young couple go to meet the priest as had been arranged. The priest, upon discovering the empty porter bottles in place of the can, flies into a rage and refuses to marry them. Worse than this, he threatens to inform the police of their shady dealings in the neighborhood. Alarmed at this prospect, the three tinkers fall on the priest and tie him up in a sack. The priest escapes from this sorry plight only by promising not to inform on the tinkers. But once he is loosed, he turns on the tinkers and calls down the wrath of God upon them. That, at least, he feels free to do. The tinkers fly for their lives, leaving the priest master of the scene.

There, in brief, is the subject of the play. For its source we do not have far to seek. Again, we find the germ of the story recorded

in Synge's notebooks. In his essay, "The Vagrants of Wicklow," we came upon the following quotation:

> "They come from every part," he said. "They're gallous lads for walking round through the world. One time I seen fifty of them above on the road to Rathdangan, and they all match-making and marrying themselves for the year that was to come. One man would take such a woman, and say he was going such roads and places, stopping at this fair and another fair, till he'd meet them again at such a place, when the spring was coming on. Another, maybe, would swap the woman he had with one from another man, with as much talk as if you'd be selling a cow. It's two hours I was there watching them from the bog underneath, where I was cutting turf, and the like of the crying and the kissing, and the singing and the shouting began when they went off this way and that way, you never heard in your life. Sometimes when a party would be gone a bit down over the hill, a girl would begin crying out and wanting to go back to her ma. Then the man would say: "Black hell to your soul, you've come with me now, and you'll go the whole way." I often seen tinkers before and since, but I never seen such a power of them as were in it that day." [1]

Then turn to the play itself, and as Michael and Sarah quarrel over their forthcoming marriage we find Michael saying:

> .....I'm thinking on the day I got you above at Rathvanna, and the way you began crying out and we coming down off the hill, crying out and saying ,"I'll go back to my ma," and I'm thinking on the way I came behind you that time, and hit you a great clout in the lug, and how quiet and easy it was you came along with me from that hour to this present day. [2]

It becomes immediately apparent that Synge drew upon this passage in his essays for his really wonderful knowledge of tramp life. Yet further on in this same book, we come across a passage that has even more direct bearing on the play we are considering. This story was related to Synge at a Wicklow Fair, and runs thus:

> One time he and his woman went up to a priest in the hills and asked him would he wed them for half a sovereign, I think it was. The priest said it was a poor price, but he'd wed them surely if they'd make him a tin can along with it. "I will, faith," said the tinker, "and I'll come back when it's done." They went off then, and in three weeks they came back, and they asked the priest a second time would

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1 Synge: Works, IV 4
2 Synge: Works, I 16

> he wed them. "Have you the tin can?" said the priest. "We have not," said the tinker; "we had it made at the fall of night, but the ass gave it a kick this morning the way it isn't fit for you at all." "Go on now," says the priest. "It's a pair of rogues and schemers you are, and I won't wed you at all." They went off then, and they were never married to this day. [1]

Synge made but few changes. He merely introduced the theft of the tin can by Mary Byrne, and the episode of the priest being tied up in the sack. This last incident was probably suggested to him by the lines we find in the poem "The Lout and His Mother," taken from Dr. Douglas Hyde's "Religious Songs of Connacht." In this poem we come across the following lines:

> Sure if you were dead tomorrow morning
> And I were to bring you to a priest tied up in a bag,
> He would not read a mass for you without hand money. [2]

We know Synge was familiar with these poems by Hyde. It is therefore not at all improbable that he was thinking of these lines when he had the three tinkers fall on the unfortunate priest and tie him up.

The play was first produced at His Majesty's Theatre, London, November 11, 1909. As we said before, the play was not acted in Ireland. Another "Playboy of the Western World" riot was feared if this play were put before an Irish audience. Even as it was, the play was hissed when first presented in London. Synge might have softened it in view of the reception "The Playboy" had received, but instead he only played up the passages that might give offense. As a matter of fact, there is little of Synge in this play. It is only in two or three passages that the lyrical Synge breaks forth. Aside from these flashes, the play is a rather sorry piece of work.

The theme of the play, as we have already remarked, is too scanty to support two acts. Then, the constant resort to such a poor mechanical dramatic aid as the tin can gets annoying as the play goes on. The

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1 Synge: Works, IV 40
2 Hyde: Religious Songs, Volume 2, page 311

characters are not really finely drawn, and with the possible exception of Mary Byrne they are rather flat. The play itself may be termed broad farce, but it is pretty hard stuff to digest. We know that Synge relished the disreputable, not because it was disreputable, but because it was expressive of the crude and cruel reality of life. In this play, Synge did not control his theme. The priest is not out of Rabelais as P. P. Howe would have it.[1] Neither is he a first cousin to Shakespeare's Sir Oliver Martext. Rabelais and Shakespeare could paint such characters without offending because they belonged to an age so intimately mixed up with religion and priests, that to joke about them was as natural as to joke about the weather. Times have changed. What Rabelais could and did do well, Synge makes offensive to good taste. We realize that the play does not intend to strike at any religious sect; its intent is but to show the life of the tinkers and that is all. Unfortunately, it does not stop there. A variation from the ordinary is commendable, as Synge himself points out in his discussion of tramp life; but even a variation must keep within bounds. This, Synge did not do in this play, possibly because the subject was not close enough to him. Be the reason what it may, the result is an inferior play.

But let us return to the characters of the play. Michael, we can perhaps dismiss the most easily. He is rather stoic. He says little, does less, and leaves no impression when the play is over. Sarah Casey is also disappointing. On the second page of the play, in answer to Michael's inquiry as to what ails her, she says: "I'm thinking there isn't anything ails me, Michael Byrne; but the springtime is a queer time, and it's queer thoughts may be I do think at whiles." [2]

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[1] P. P. Howe: Synge, page 81

[2] Synge: Works, 1 14

From this speech one expects great things of Sarah later on in the play. But they never come. Sarah's implied sensibility fails to materialize, and she goes thru the play just another ordinary person. The priest also fails to impress, either by his nobleness or by his boisterousness. Of the first quality, he has none; of the second, he has less. Michael says of him: "It's often his reverence does be in there playing cards, or drinking a sup, or singing songs, until the dawn of day."[1] If the priest really were such a character, he might prove interesting. Then, he might be out of Rabelais. But again, he does not prove to be that type. We are <u>told</u> he is that, but we are not shown. Mary Byrne, Michael's mother, is the most interesting person in the play. She is an old tipsy tramper; one might feel inclined to say <u>just</u> an old tipsy tramper were it not for monologues like this:

> What good am I this night, God help me? What good are the grand stories I have when it's few would listen to an old woman, few but a girl maybe would be in great fear the time her hour was come, or a little child wouldn't be sleeping with the hunger on a cold night? (She takes the can from the sacking and fits in three empty bottles and straw in its place, and ties them up.) Maybe the two of them have a good right to be walking out the little short while they'd be young; but if they have itself, they'll not keep Mary Byrne from her full pint when the night's fine, and there's a dry moon in the sky. (She takes up the can, and puts the package back in the ditch.) Jemmy Neill's a decent lad; and he'll give me a good drop for the can; and maybe if I keep near the peelers to-morrow for the first bit of the fair, herself won't strike me at all; and if she does itself, what's a little stroke on your head beside sitting lonesome on a fine night hearing the dogs barking, and the bats squeaking, and you saying over, it's a short while only till you die. [2]

There speaks a finer Mary and a finer Synge, but it is only a flash. Mary becomes just an old gamey woman again, and reels drunkenly through the rest of the play.

In closing, we may say of the characters of this play that they are not fine people. There is no tragedy in the loneliness of Mary;

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1 Synge: Works, 1 18
2 Synge: Works, 1 31

neither is there any tragedy in Sarah's failure to get married. These people are figures of comedy only. One might argue that it does not take noble people to build up great drama. That is quite true, but in that case the treatment they receive from the dramatist must at least be noble if the drama is to be great. In this play, neither the people nor their treatment is fine. One feels inclined to agree with the critics, and ask why this play was ever produced. It is certainly not worthy of Synge, and his reputation would not suffer in the least by its suppression.

THE WELL OF THE SAINTS

"The Well of the Saints" is perhaps the most elusive of Synge's plays. It puzzles us by its subtle flavor, and in this respect it is different from any of Synge's other plays. It does not startle us like "The Playboy"; it does not arouse the same admiration as does "Riders to the Sea"; it does not give us the same feeling of utter loneliness as does "Deirdre"; but it has its own peculiar quality. It is not a great play, but it is a good play; and it is as a good play that we shall deal with it.

There seems to be some confusion as where to place this play. It comes third in the collected edition of Synge's works, but it is doubtful if it was Synge's third written play. The play was probably begun in 1902, but due to Synge's chronic ill health it is doubtful if it was finished much before 1905. We know it was first performed February 4, 1905, at the newly opened Abbey Theatre. It seems quite possible that the writing of the play took several years, because one feels a unity in its undersong that could come only when the author had steeped himself deeply in his subject. Of the play's first presentation, Lady

Gregory says: "It was let pass without much comment though we had a very small audience for it."[1] This was one of the few occasions when the presentation of a new play by Synge was not the occasion of a riot.

The play itself is in three acts, the first three act play of Synge's that we have considered. The story may be summarized briefly. Two blind beggars, Martin and Mary Doul, are informed by Timmy, the smith, of the coming of a holy man from far parts of Ireland. It seems that this saint has with him water from the Well of the Saints, and that it is in his power to restore sight to the blind by use of this water. Martin and Mary Doul submit to be cured, but they are not happily cured. Seeing, they lose their illusions, and see themselves and the world as they really are. The result is misery and estrangement for both of them. Blindness, however, overtakes them again. And once again the holy man wishes to cure them, but this time Martin is obdurate. The blind couple prefer their blindness and their dreams to the security of a seeing existence. As the play closes, we see them wandering off, probably to destruction and death, yet blind and happy.

There is the story. It is not found as such in any of Synge's sketches, but again we may resort to the sketches to find it implied there. Many other origins, however, have been suggested. Padraic Colum tells us that Synge told him the idea of the story was suggested to him by an old French farce.[2] This may be true, but the source has never been traced down. Then, a play by Clemenceau, "Le Voile du Bonheur," has also been hinted at as a possible source. Clemenceau's play deals with the same subject, but its treatment is banal. And so far as the subject goes, it is common in literature. Synge might equally well have got the idea from Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale," Maeterlinck's "Les

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1 Lady Gregory: Our Irish Theatre, page 111
2 Padraic Colum: Road Round Ireland, page 367

Aveugles," Zola's "Lourdes"; Huysman's "Lourdes," Reade's "Cricket on the Hearth," or any number of such similar works. But it is more likely that Synge created the tale from stray bits of information that he picked up in his travels. The form of the play is not so strong as the content. From this fact, one may infer that Synge did not get the story as such, but built it up from material gleaned from many sources.

Of these many sources, however, we can be a little more assertive. We have only to turn to our faithful source book, "The Aran Islands," and there we find this statement: "A couple of miles from this village we turned aside to look at an old ruined church of the Ceathair Aluinn (The Four Beautiful Persons), and a holy well near it that is famous for cures of blindness and epilepsy." [1] A paragraph below we find:

> A woman of Sligo had a son who was born blind, and one night she dreamed that she saw an island with a blessed well in it that could cure her son. She told her dream in the morning, and an old man said it was of Aran she was after dreaming.
>
> She brought her son down by the coast of Galway, and came out in a curagh, and landed below where you see a bit of a cove.
>
> She walked up then to the house of my father---God rest his soul---and she told them what she was looking for.
>
> My father said that there was a well like what she had dreamed of, and that he would send a boy along with her to show her the way.
>
> "There's no need, at all," said she; "haven't I seen it all in my dream?"
>
> Then she went out with the child and walked up to this well, and she kneeled down, and began saying her prayers. Then she put her hand out for the water, and put it on his eyes, and the moment it touched him he called out: "O mother, look at the pretty flowers!" [2]

There is no doubt that these statements are incorporated in the following selection from the play:

> TIMMY. Did ever you hear tell of a place across a bit of the sea, where there is an island, and the grave of the four beautiful saints?

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1 Synge: Works, III 30
2 Synge: Works, III 30

> MARY DOUL. I've heard people have walked round from the west and they speaking of that.
>
> TIMMY --impressively.-- There's a green ferny well, I'm told, behind of that place, and if you put a drop of the water out of it on the eyes of a blind man, you'll make him see as well as any person is walking the world. [1]

Synge did not use the whole scene. The story of a mother and her blind child was perhaps more than he felt capable of dealing with. We must remember that Synge was interested in folk lore. He seemed insensible to finer values. For example, never does Synge, in any of his plays, deal with children. Be that as it may, we have our first clue here.

We may also quote the following from "The Aran Islands" as indicative of where and how Synge got his material:

> About six o'clock I was going into the schoolmaster's house, and I heard a fierce wrangel going on between a man and a woman near the cottages to the west, that lie below the road. While I was listening to them several women came down to listen also from behind the wall, and told me that the people who were fighting were near relations who lived side by side and often quarrelled about trifles, though they were as good friends as ever the next day. The voices sounded so enraged that I thought mischief would come of it, but the women laughed at the idea. Then a lull came, and I said that they seemed to have finished at last. [2]

This specific incident is not, of course, incorporated in "The Well of the Saints", yet there we find the old couple, Martin and Mary Doul , constantly quarreling. They quarrel as other people might sing, not viciously, but merely as a form of amusement, just as we saw the old couple on the Aran Islands doing. But further on we come on a more positive clue. In the play, Martin accuses Timmy of plucking live ducks. In "The Aran Islands", we find this observation as Synge speaks of the lack of sympathy for pain characteristic of the islanders:"..... and sometimes when I go into a cottage I find all the women of the place down on their knees plucking the feathers from live ducks and geese." [3]

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1 Synge: Works, 1 23
2 Synge: Works, 111 185
3 Synge: Works, 111 203

Synge had observed this cruel practice, and he has Martin attribute it to Timmy in a moment of anger. Then, when Martin Doul first regains his sight he goes about identifying the people around him. Of one person he says: "That should be Patch Ruadh, with the gamey eyes in him, and the fiery hair." [1] In "The Aran Islands", Synge discusses the names which the islanders give each other: "Sometimes a man is named from the colour of his hair. There is thus a Seaghan Ruadh (Red John)". [2] Patch is short for Patrick. But this is not all. Synge's first Gaelic teacher on the island, Pat Dirane, had been an old "dark" man. Synge says of him:

> As we talked he sat huddled together over the fire, shaking and blind, yet his face was indescribably pliant, lighting up with an ecstacy of humour when he told me anything that had a point of wit or malice, and growing sombre and desolate again when he spoke of religion or the fairies.[3]

Here, perhaps, lies the germ that later developed into the old blind beggar, Martin. These two characters have a lot in common.

But finally, and this is perhaps the most important clue, is this account Synge gives of an old vagrant he met in Wicklow:

> When he was over ninety he married an old woman of eighty-five. Before many days, however, they quarrelled so fiercely that he beat her with his stick, and came out again on the roads. In a few hours he was arrested at her complaint, and sentenced to a month in Kilmainham. He cared nothing for the plank-bed and uncomfortable diet; but he always gathered himself together, and cursed with extraordinary rage, as he told how they cut off the white hair which had grown down upon his shoulders. All his pride and his half-conscious feeling for the dignity of his age seemed to have set themselves on this long hair,which marked him out from the other people of this district; and I have often heard him say to himself, as he sat beside me under a ditch: "What use is an old man without his hair? A man has only his bloom like the trees; and what use is an old man without his white hair?" [4]

It would seem that here is the material Synge used when he had Martin find consolation for his ugliness and old age in the fine silken white beard he will be growing.

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1 Synge: Works, 1 37
2 Synge: Works, 111 157
3 Synge: Works, 111 23
4 Synge: Works, 1V 3

In connection with this reference to Martin's beard, it is interesting to note how the hair motif runs all thru the play and what a unifying element it proves to be. The play has no sooner opened than we get our first reference. Martin says to his wife: "You were that length plaiting your yellow hair you have the morning lost on us." [1] Two pages further on, Mary Doul says of Molly: "She was jealous, God forgive her, because Timmy the smith was after praising my hair." [2] Then when Martin regains his sight and mistakes Molly for Mary, it is because of her hair:"....for it's grand hair you have." [3] When Martin finds out he is mistaken, he goes to the Bride thinking she is Mary because she has fine yellow hair too. When Martin does find the true Mary he is appalled, but it is again of her hair that he speaks first: "I'm telling you there isn't a wisp on any grey mare on the ridge of the world isn't finer than the dirty twist on your head." [4] But it is Mary who first consciously discovers this charm to which they may attain. Blind for the second time, she refuses to be discouraged, saying:

> For when I seen myself in them pools, I seen my hair would be gray or white, maybe, in a short while, and I seen with it that I'd a face would be a great wonder when it'll have soft white hair falling around it, the way when I'm an old woman there won't be the like of me surely in the seven counties of the east.[5]

Martin is discouraged at first, but then he too gets an idea:

> I've this to say, Mary Doul. I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while, a beautiful, long, white, silken, streamy beard, you wouldn't see the like of in the eastern world----Ah, a white beard's a grand thing on an old man, a grand thing for making the quality stop and be stretching out their hands with good silver or gold, and a beard's a thing you'll never have, so you may be holding your tongue.[6]

The hair motif has now done its work. The two are reconciled, are happy again. But they are not willing to risk seeing their dreams. This time they prefer to stay blind.

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1 Synge: Works, 1 15
2 Synge: Works, 1 17
3 Synge: Works, 1 37
4 Synge: Works, 1 41
5 Synge: Works, 1 71
6 Synge: Works, 1 73

And so Synge used his material in this play. Again we find collaboration. But we find much more than that. Synge brought sympathy to a hackneyed theme. Therein lies his merit, and there is the reason why his play is good while Clemenceau's is trivial. But Synge's play is also different in other respects from Clemenceau's. Synge's play has many elements of folk lore in it. It is hard and sane in this respect, almost callous. The villagers, for example, mock at the blind pair rather than pity them. This sane biting reality in the treatment of a more or less "weepy" subject is commendable. We do not pity the blind beggars in a wishy-washy way. We waste no vain sentimentality on their condition in life. We merely accept them as more or less dim creatures, living a century or more ago in some unknown spot of Ireland. Synge perhaps purposely set his play back in time so that it might give us this feeling. In this respect too he was wise. The play thus becomes more intimately identified with folk lore, and this makes it easier for us to accept it. In short, we may say of this play what we said of "Riders to the Sea". Synge was dealing with a subject of his own choice, a subject he responded too generously. The result could not fail to be successful.

"The Well of the Saints" has often been called the most Irish of Synge's plays. Bourgeois implies this fact, while Ernest A. Boyd says of it: " 'The Well of the Saints' is the only occasion in Synge's career where he appears to express the traditional revolt of the Celtic mind against the despotism of fact."[1] But this statement does not seem valid. Deirdre, it seems to me, expresses more revolt than Martin, altho she may not appear to do so. Martin, I should say, is incapable of revolt. He is too animal for that, lovable character tho he may be. I doubt if his conception of ideals is at all developed. He knows what he sees while he has his sight, and what he feels with his fingers for the rest of the time; but his imagination can go no further than his

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1 E. A. Boyd: The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, page 100

physical appetites. I cannot picture him in revolt against a too real existence. But I do picture him as a vivid personality. Therein lies the real Irishness of the play: the fact that it deals with a real personality. It is not the nature of the theme that makes the play Irish, but rather the treatment given the characters. Martin is one of Synge's most vivid personalities. The Playboy is vivid, but he is more lyric. Martin is vivid and human. We may say of Martin what we could say of Synge himself: he was insensitive to finer values, but he was sane and healthy.

It is the richness and abundance of the characters of this play that give it its strength. An author like G. B. Shaw has opinions walking, not characters, in his plays; none of them can match Martin Doul, the old blind beggar. Here is no personified opinion. Doul is sheer character. Take the man himself, - what is he? Are we attracted by his intellect? by his vision? by his charm? No! Martin is purely physical. We know and admit he is an old fool, yet we can't help liking him. So purely physical is Martin that he has only to hear Molly talking in the morning in order to set his mind on the girls all day long. Yet in this "little dark stump of a fellow" lies a passion and an intensity that we have not yet seen in any of Synge's characters. The love scene between Martin and Molly is sufficiently indicative of this. This scene is magnificent, not in the sense of admirable or elevating, but for its sheer intensity. Here is Martin, poor, old, and shabby, making love to Molly, a young handsome girl. The very helplesness of the affair is touching. Molly despises Martin, and he knows it. But he is of the stuff which cannot rest. He sets the whole community by the ears. Timmy he shames into washing his face. Molly he instills with a bit of the restlessness that is within him. Martin so stirs the whole community

out of its complacency that he has Timmy saying uneasily of Molly:

> She's no call to mind what way I look, and I after building a house with four rooms in it above on the hill. (He stands up.) But it's a queer thing the way yourself and Mary Doul are after setting every person in this place, and up beyond to Rathvanna, talking of nothing, and thinking of nothing, but the way they do be looking in the face. (Going towards forge.) It's the devil's work you're after doing with your talk of fine looks, and I'd do right, maybe, to step in and wash the blackness from my eyes.[1]

Timmy here tacitly admits his fear of Martin, a fear for an old dried up bit of a man, but a man who will not rest still, a man who will not be denied. We feel as restless as Timmy does after hearing Martin's love speeches to Molly. Such a man is not to be dismissed lightly. But, to summarize, Martin's abundance of character is perhaps best shown in this, his longest speech of the play:

> The devil mend Mary Doul for putting lies on me, and letting on she was grand. The devil mend the old Saint for letting me see it was lies. (He sits down near her.) The devil mend Timmy the smith for killing me with hard work, and keeping me with an empty, windy stomach in me, in the day and in the night. Ten thousand devils mend the soul of Molly Byrne--(Mary Doul nods her head with approval)--and the bad, wicked souls is hidden in all the women of the world. (He rocks himself, with his hand over his face.) It's lonesome I'll be from this day, and if living people is a bad lot, yet Mary Doul, herself, and she a dirty, wrinkled-looking hag, was better maybe to be sitting along with than no one at all. I'll be getting my death now, I'm thinking, sitting alone in the cold air, hearing the night coming, and the blackbirds flying around in the briars crying to themselves, the time you'll hear one cart getting off a long way in the east, and another cart getting off a long way in the west, and a dog barking maybe, and a little wind turning the sticks. (He listens and sighs heavily.) I'll be destroyed sitting alone and losing my senses this time the way I'm after losing my sight, for it'd make any person afeard to be sitting up hearing the sound of his breadth--(he moves his feet on the stones)--and the noise of his feet, when it's a power of queer things do be stirring, little sticks breaking, and the grass moving-- (Mary Doul half sighs, and he turns on her in horror)-- till you'd take your dying oath on sun and moon a thing was breathing on the stones. (He listens towards her for a moment, then starts up nervously, and gropes about for his stick.) I'll be going now, I'm thinking, but I'm not sure what place

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[1]Synge: Works, 1 53

> my stick's in, and I'm destroyed with terror and dread. (He touches her face as he is groping about and cries out.) There's a thing with a cold, living face on it sitting up at my side. (He turns to run away, but misses his path and stumbles in against the wall.) My road is lost on me now! Oh, merciful God, set my foot on the path this day, and I'll be saying prayers morning and night, and not straining my ear after young girls, or doing any bad thing till I die---.[1]

In these words, shading from one emotion to another, we see a man; a man now angry, now lonesome, now afraid, now meek, now suppliant, but always a human being.

Mary Doul is quite unlike her husband. Her character too has been moulded by years of blindness, but in her case the result has been different. Martin is an extrovert; Mary is an introvert. Whereas Martin finds his joy in life in the people and things about him, Mary is a perfect picture of calm self-centredness. She never looks at the other men the way Martin looks at the young girls. She is too sufficient unto herself for that. One can't imagine her making advances to any man; much less can one imagine her favorably receiving them. Mary is always calm, never getting herself into trouble the way her hot-headed spouse has a habit of doing. One senses this difference in the character of husband and wife especially well in the reply each makes when they learn that the Saint is going to cure them of blindness. Martin exclaims: "And we'll be seeing ourselves this day. Oh, glory be to God, is it true surely?"[2] But all that Mary can say is: "Maybe I'd have time to walk down and get the big shawl I have below."[3] That is how the announcement affects her. And there is Mary Doul, so different from, yet not too different from, Martin to live a wedded life with him.

We may dismiss the other characters of the play more briefly. The Saint is rather, one hesitates to say it, a fool. He is very little different from the villagers about him. Of intellect, he shows little;

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1 Synge: Works, 1 68
2 Synge; Works, 1 26
3 Synge: Works, 1 26

of intuition, none. Mary Doul sums up his character in a single line in her reply to Molly in this scene:

> MOLLY BYRNE. "The lads told him no person could carry them things through the briars, and steep, slippy-feeling rocks he'll be climbing above, so he looked round then, and gave the water, and his big cloak, and his bell to the two of us, for young girls, says he, are the cleanest holy people you'd see walking in the world."
>
> (Mary Doul goes near seat.)
>
> MARY DOUL---sits down, laughing to herself.---Well, the Saint's a simple fellow, and it's no lie.[1]

We cannot help feeling that Mary is quite right.

Molly and Timmy are secondary characters. Molly we may dismiss as a vain, light-headed creature. Her remark about the Saint is characteristic: "He'd walk by the finest woman in Ireland, I'm thinking, and not trouble to raise his two eyes to look upon her face."[2] Molly can't understand a man like that; no coquette could. That is all we have to say about her. Timmy seems to be little other than a good natured ox, a man whom Molly will make thoroughly miserable. He is kind. It is he who brings news of the Saint's coming to the blind couple. It is he who tries to have them cured a second time. He also, it is, who gives work to Martin. But his goodness of heart is not matched by his keenness of intellect. One can foresee only unhappiness for him married to Molly, an incipient shrew.

"The Well of the Saints" has been accused of not being a well made play. It is Synge's first three-act play, and the accusation is brought against it that it is nothing more than a series of one-act plays strung together. This is hardly true. There is, we must grant, a certain unity in each act, but there is nothing wrong in this because there is a greater unity thruout. The technical requirement of expectation is fulfilled at the end of each act. We have already mentioned the unifying effect of

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1 Synge: Works, 1 27
2 Synge: Works, 1 32

the hair motif; we might add that the play as a whole has the unity of a parable. Synge, of course, intended no moral. But it is this parable effect which makes the play unified, makes it universal. The rhythm of the play is another of its obvious strengths. It is by means of the slow rhythm that we get to appreciate the nervous undercurrent that makes for the life force of Martin Doul. This rhythm, deep toned and sonorous, makes the play integral from opening to close.

Taken as a whole, the play is a good drama. The little touches here and there of anticipation and expectation are deft and show a masterly craft. The play is not closet drama. Synge always had the advantage of writing for the stage. His plays are therefore adapted to stage presentation. "The Well of the Saints" is no exception. Its weakest point is perhaps its ending. Here Synge comes as close as he ever does to pointing out a moral. We wish he had not done so, but the fact remains, unintentional but apparent. Aside from this, the play ranks as one of his best because it pictures vivid characters in a mellow medium.

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

It is as impossible to deal with this play without mention of its stormy birth in the theatre as it is to deal with George Washington without mention of the cherry tree. Yet both events smack of legend, and legend is notorious for its disregard of scholarly truth. What are the real events connected with the first presentation of "The Playboy" at the Abbey Theatre (the play was first performed there January 26,1907)? Legend tells us there were riots, but let us deal with better authorities. Padraic Colum has given us a very good account of what happened on that memorable first night, He says:

> I remember well how the play nearly got past the dubiousness of that first-night audience. The third act was near its close when the line that

> drew the first hiss was spoken,--"A drift of the finest women in the County Mayo standing in their shifts around me." That hiss was a signal for a riot in the theatre. They had been disconcerted and impatient before this, but the audience, I think, would not have made any interruption if this line had not been spoken. Still, they had been growing hostile to the play from the point where Christy's father enters. That scene was too representational. There stood a man with horribly-bloodied bandage upon his head, making a figure that took the whole thing out of the atmosphere of high comedy. [1]

So much for the first night; hardly a riot. We may take W. B. Yeats as our authority for the rest of the week. He says:

> On the second performance of "The Playboy of the Western World", about forty men who sat in the middle of the pit succeeded in making the play entirely inaudible. Some of them brought tim trumpets, and the noise began immediately on the rise of the curtain. For days articles in the Press called for the withdrawal of the play, but we played for the seven nights we had announced; and before the week's end opinion had turned in our favour. There were, however, nightly disturbances and a good deal of rioting in the surrounding streets. On the last night of the play there were, I believe, five hundred police keeping order in the theatre and in its neighbourhood.[2]

In these two quotations, we may assume that we have a fairly calm account of what actually happened. The reception given the play was beyond doubt stormy. Let us inquire more closely why. The protest, in general, was nationalistic and religious. Lady Gregory tells us that the audience objected to the parricide and the too strong language used. The play was also objected to as a vilification of Irish womanhood. In fact, as the excitement grew, the play was objected to on all sorts of grounds. But let us hear what Freeman's Journal had to say the morning after the play:

> "A strong protest," wrote their representative, "must be entered against this unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood. The blood boils with indignation

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1 P. Colum: Road Round Ireland, page 368
2 W. B. Yeats: Plays and Controversies, page 193

> as one recalls the incidents, expressions, and ideas of this squalid, offensive production, incongruously styled a comedy in three acts. No adequate idea can be given of the barbarous jargon, the elaborate and incessant cursings of these repulsive creatures. Everything is a b-----y this or a b-----y that, and into this picturesque dialogue names that should only be used with respect and reverence are frequently introduced. This hideous caricature would be slanderous of a Kaffir kraal.
>
> "The piece is announced to run for the week; it is to be hoped that it will be instantly withdrawn. If a company of English artistes attempted such an outrage the public indignation would be rightly bitter. Indeed no denunciation could be sufficiently strong. The whole affair is absolutely incomprehensible however it is examined. That such a piece should have been conceived and written is strange enough; that it should have been accepted, rehearsed and enacted at a house supposed to be dedicated to high dramatic art and truth would be past all belief but that is has actually been done. The worst specimen of the stage Irishman of the past is a refined, acceptable fellow compared with that imagined by Mr. Synge, and as for his women, it is not possible, even if it were desirable, to class them."[1]

It seems a rather herculean task to attempt to classify such divergent protests and to try to account for them briefly, but the whole affair reduces itself to a protest on nationalistic and religious grounds. Let us consider first offended Nationalism.

The Irishman is very touchy. We should not regard this as a fault; there is a reason for it. The student of history knows that the lot of Ireland for the past few centuries has been an unfortunate one. Ireland has been so oppressed and suppressed that the results could not fail to become apparent. And as one result, the Irishman has become suspicious and proud. In fact, the Irishman has perhaps become too suspicious and too proud, that is, touchy. In 1907, when the play was first presented, the Irish revival movement was at its height. Imagine the combination; a people naturally sensitive at an extreme peak of sensibility. Then thrust "The Playboy" upon them, with its obvious disregard

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1 Theatre Arts Monthly, March, 1932

for any of the finer feelings. There could be but one result. There was but one result. The protest was inevitable. We cannot blame Ireland for it. She had been heretofore fed on rather thin gruel, stuff written not to represent Irish life but to amuse English audiences. We cannot blame Synge. One feels inclined to say that in a certain sense he was a fool. In this case he proved to be a fool. Synge was simple enough, I believe, to think that a Dublin audience would look upon this play as unrelated to their life, as a detached bit of art. Synge himself could have done this. He imputed this power to people with but little of his detached artistic training and much of that supersensitiveness which he lacked. The result was the riot.

Few authorities are willing to admit that Synge deliberately gave way to a desire to shock his audience in this play. As a matter of fact, when one considers Synge, this idea seems untenable. Synge's view of life was naturalistic. He had no more subtle philosophy of life than to give free play to the demonic that is in every man. This is what he does in all his plays with the exception of "Riders to the Sea." In "The Playboy," he does no more, no less. He himself admitted that the play was mere extravaganza. It was not supposed to be a faithful representation of life in the Western World. The play seizes upon certain flashes of life there, of life at its highest pitch. But it is by no means to be regarded as a satire. Synge himself would have admitted that in his play he had seized only upon certain aspects of life,--a flash of laughter, a moment of delirium. That is where his interest lay. Had the Dublin audiences seen the situation from this point of view there would have been no riot. There could have been none. Unfortunately, they, in their way, were as blind as Synge was in his. Just another case of misunderstanding, with offended nationalism at the root.

In Ireland, it is impossible to separate nationalism from religion. We have already seen that Synge was unconscious of the spiritual feeling of his fellow Irishmen. "The Playboy" is only another example of Synge's deficiency in this respect. Synge does fling holy names and religious allusions about with a little too gay abandon. There was no need for this; it does not strengthen the play; it is the cheapest thing about the play. Naturally, the Irish people resented this sacrilege, as they would call it. One can understand their feeling and approve of it. Synge was, it seems, unable to do so. It is not for us to lay blame here or there. We can only regret that Synge did not more nearly attain to the earnest conduct of life. Having said that, however, why take sides? We have seen Synge's viewpoint, we have seen that of the Dublin audiences. As the philosopher might say, there is a great deal to be said on both sides.

The story of "The Playboy" is not so simple to tell as have been the plots of the other plays we have considered to this point. There are more characters to consider for one thing, and more twists to the tale. The scene opens and is enacted in a country public house or shebeen. It is evening, and Pegeen, daughter of the house, is alone. Her fiancé, Shawn Keough, enters, and talk passes to her father who is going to leave her alone to attend a wake across the sands. At this moment, a slight young man enters, very tired and very cold. We learn that this young man is Christy Mahon, the future Playboy. Christy's appearance causes a commotion in the house. He asks if it is a safe house, and hints that the police may be after him. He leads on the inmates, and is in turn led on by them to confess that he killed his da a week ago last Tuesday. This announcement is seized upon with mingled awe and admiration. Christy is immediately made pot boy, and left to protect Pegeen while her father and friends go off. Pegeen soon gets

rid of the craven Shawn, but she is not to enjoy her new find very long. Widow Quin enters, sent by Shawn to spy upon the couple. But she too is soon got rid of, and after a short talk with Pegeen, Christy settles down on a fine clean bed for the night. In the second act, we see Christy the following morning. He has become the object of adulation for all the girls of the countryside, due to the spread of his famous tale. Pegeen is naturally a bit jealous; Shawn is positively frightened. The Widow Quin enters again, and she is in the act of offering Christy some very alluring proposals when Christy's murdered da walks in. Christy hides in terror, and leaves to the Widow the task of misdirecting Old Mahon, for the old man is in search of his son. In Act three, the Playboy enters into the sports with the local boys and takes off all the prizes. His new manhood has blossomed as a result of the adulation he has received from the natives. But Old Mahon returns inopportunely to spoil it all, proving Christy a liar. Everyone now turns against Christy, who, in a rage, "kills" his father a second time. Christy now expects to be reestablished in the popular esteem, but instead he learns that "there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed."[1] But Old Mahon still survives. He enters again to drive off his son, but this time it is he who is driven off. Christy can afford to scorn every one now, Pegeen included. He has in the end become a real Playboy of the Western World.

The sources of this play are again to be found in Synge's prose works. In "The Aran Islands", we find this passage containing the central theme of the play:

> He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with a blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole--which the old man has shown me--and kept him safe for weeks, though the police

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1 Synge: Works, II 107

> came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America.[1]

Synge then goes on to talk about how crime is regarded in the west. The following passage may make it easier for us to understand how Christy is so readily accepted by the natives:

> This impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west....these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, (feel) that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea.[2]

We find not only the theme of this play in Synge's prose works, but also actual phrases and ideas which he wove into it. For example, Synge records seeing a horse race run off on the sands in his essay "In West Kerry."[3] Here is no doubt where he got the idea for the race Christy engages in. Then, in "The Aran Islands", he tells us the story of a fellow who always won his races: "There was a man of the name of Charley Lambert, and every horse he would ride in a race he would come in the first."[4] Here again we have material for that stirring horse race on the sands. But for Synge's actual use of words and phrases he had heard, let us compare the following selection with what he has Michael say in the play. Old Mourteen in "The Aran Islands" says:

> Bedad, noble person, I'm thinking it's soon you'll be getting married. Listen to what I'm telling you: a man who is not married is no better than an old jackass. He goes into his sister's house, and into his brother's house; he eats a bit in this place and a bit in another place, but he has no home for himself; like an old jackass straying on the rocks.[5]

Then in the play, Michael says: "What's a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking a sup in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braying jackass strayed upon the rocks?"[6]

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1 Synge: Works, III 96
2 Synge: Works, III 96
3 Synge: Works, IV 110
4 Synge: Works, III 207
5 Synge: Works, III 133
6 Synge: Works, II 98

But let us take another example. Synge, staying on the great Blasket Island, slept in a bed adjacent to his host who carried on the following conversation:

> "You'll be tired now," he went on, "so it's time we were sleeping; and, I humbly beg your pardon, might I ask your name?" I told him. "Well, good night so," he said, "and may you have a good sleep your first night in this island." [1]

In "The Playboy", we find Michael James asking Christy:

> MICHAEL--going to the door with men. And begging your pardon, mister, what name will we call you, for we'd like to know?
>
> CHRISTY. Christopher Mahon.
>
> MICHAEL. Well, God bless you, Christy, and a good rest till we meet again when the sun'll be rising to the noon of day.[2]

And all of these are only so many more indications of Synge's ability to make use of what he had seen or heard and recorded in his essays. We have not exhausted the sources of this play, but short of quoting Synge's prose works in full we can give no further examples at this time. We can only indicate that there are many more examples.

"The Playboy" can hardly be considered as Synge's masterpiece. It has too many incongruities of technique for that. Granting that the workings of the spirit may dazzle one, we find it a bit hard to accept the fact that Christy won over a whole community with his recital of how he killed his da. Would the people so readily not only shield but admire a murderer? Then, to raise another objection, how could Christy race so soon after being all tired out the day before? Granting that the adulation of Pegeen was strong wine, could it so change Christy in one short day? At the opening of the play, Pegeen feeds Christy bread and milk. The Widow Quin thinks he is more fitted to say his catechism than to murder his da. Old Mahon regards his son as a simpleton. Yet is this the same boy who in the short space of one day becomes a terror and drives his father before him like "a gallant captain with ~~the~~ his heathen

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1 Synge: Works, IV 75
2 Synge: Works, II 28

slave?"[1] Yes, we are forced to admit that these two persons are one. We must accept this fact, for therein lies the keystone of the play, a rather weak keystone, we feel. Christy is a fine example of a developing character. The play depicts poetically the growth of the imaginative and emotional side of his character under the lamp of adulation,--a forced growth perhaps, but nevertheless, so we are led to believe, a real growth. Here we come on the age old theme: the woman's influence ennobling the man. Christy is the only character in the play who changes, but his change is so mapped out that once we have considered it, it ceases to be interesting; it is too obvious. Take, for example, his relating of the tale of how he killed his father. The first time he tells the story it is quite simple: "I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all." [2] The next time he tells the story he has halved the skull.[3] The third time it is even better: "Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet."[4] And finally, Christy is the "gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt."[5] Christy just about had to stop there. He couldn't go much further. The peculiar thing about Christy is that he is not a liar. He is a Celt, and in self-deception lies the key to his character. The Celt is in need of illusion. Michael James gets his illusion thru drink; Christy gets his thru his embroiderings.

Yet when all is said and done, the characters of this play are not particularly subtle. Christy, as we have seen, is a very obvious person. Pegeen is no less so. She is pert and bright, susceptible to a gamey fellow, but little else. She is no more than a stock character.

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1 Synge: Works, II 110
2 Synge: Works, II 35
3 Synge: Works, II 35
4 Synge: Works, II 51
5 Synge: Works, II 65

Christy, the Playboy, she admires, saying: "I wouldn't give a thraneen for a lad hadn't a mighty spirit in him and a gamey heart."[1] But she can see no further than this same gamey heart. Her lamentation at the end of the play cannot be taken too seriously: "I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World."[2] We feel like replying to her to save her tears. She'll get another Playboy soon, or accept Shawn as a pretty good substitute. And yet Howe calls Pegeen Mike one of the most beautiful and living figures in all drama.[3] Why, we don't know yet. We wish we did. The Widow Quin makes us think of Mary Doul, but a less complete Mary Doul. She too is somewhat of a philosopher in her calm consideration of life. She tries to get Christy for herself, but she reasons that if she can't do that, she might as well get what she can from him. So she does. One way or another, we feel it makes very little difference to her.

Michael James and Old Mahon have a great deal in common. They both live the life dictated to them by the demon within. They are natural and unashamed; characters that we imagine must have been dear to Synge's heart. Renan says the Celt is in need of illusion. That is why he gets drunk. Michael James drunk is more distinguished than Michael James sober. Old Mahon dictated to is more happy than Old Mahon dictator. Again, the Celt is in need of a dream world. These characters are brutal, but we must remember that Synge believed that poetry had to become brutal in order to become human again. This play is a working example of his belief in that theory.

The chief defect that one can find in "The Playboy" is the fact that it strains after effect. Most of the time it strains in a pathetic hopeless way, and the end attained is gaudy rather than great. Such speeches as this of Christy's may be all right in their place, but when they reoccur upon every page of the play they become merely a mannerism,

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1 Synge: Works, II 60
2 Synge: Works, II 111
3 P. P. Howe: Synge, page 168

and as such they are exceedingly annoying:

> Aid me for to win Pegeen. It's herself only that I'm seeking now. (Widow Quin gets up and goes to window.) Aid me for to win her, and I'll be asking God to stretch a hand to you in the hour of death, and lead you short cuts through the Meadows of Ease, and up the floor of Heaven to the Footstool of the Virgin's Son.[1]

The example we have taken is only one chosen at random. It is perhaps not the most apt, but it does serve to illustrate an annoying play upon words, a striving for effect. This speech is supposed to be intense; it merely succeeds in being pitiful. It seems strange that a man who believed that the thought, not the clothing of a speech, was the thing to aim at, should fall into such dark ways. One might also here mention again Synge's indiscriminate use of holy words and allusions in this play. Again, a too obvious straining after effect, a straining that defeats its purpose.

The play, however, as an example of dramatic work deserves high praise. With the exception of the conclusion to the second act, which is very weak, the play shows Synge at his best as a skillful dramatic workman. The play has been compared to Synge's eyes: a sudden gleam of laughter and then the sorrowful look coming in them again. Synge took a determined delight in contrasts in this play, again the touch of the born dramatist. For example, imagine Christy, swelling and expanding as he relates how he killed his da. Then what should happen? The murdered da appears:

> CHRISTY. From this out I'll have no want of company when all sorts is bringing me their food and clothing (he swaggers to the door, tightening his belt), the way they'd set their eyes upon a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt. (He opens door, then staggers back.) Saints of glory! Holy angels from the throne of light!
>
> WIDOW QUIN--going over.--What ails you?
>
> CHRISTY. It's the walking spirit of my murdered da?[2]

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1 Synge: Works, II 73

2 Synge: Works, II 65

Christy is here deflated with a suddenness that has in it the true sense of the dramatic value of surprise. This is only one example. The play could furnish many such. Then, there are but few broken speeches in the play, an annoying mannerism affected by lesser dramatists. And Synge also shows his dramatic skill in his use of cumulative humor. Take this speech of the distracted Shawn to the Widow Quin:

> Oh, Widow Quin, what'll I be doing now? I'd inform again him, but he'd burst from Kilmainham and he'd be sure and certain to destroy me. If I wasn't so God-fearing, I'd near have courage to come behind him and run a pike into his side. Oh, it's a hard case to be an orphan and not to have your father that you're used to, and you'd easy kill and make yourself a hero in the sight of all.[1]

While mentioning the effective touches of the true dramatist in this play, one cannot overlook the famous love scene between Christy and Pegeen. Good love scenes in drama are rare. Many dramatists choose to avoid them. That Synge so succeeded in imparting reality to this scene between Christy and Pegeen is something we can only admire and admit to be great drama. We cannot forbear from quoting a part of this scene, a scene which Boyd considers one of the finest in all literature:

> PEGEEN--looking at him playfully.-- And it's that kind of a poacher's love you'd make, Christy Mahon, on the sides of Neifin, when the night is down?
>
> CHRISTY. It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's, or an earl's itself, when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair.
>
> PEGEEN. That'll be right fun, Christy Mahon, and any girl would walk her heart out before she'd meet a young man was your like for eloquence, or talk, at all.
>
> CHRISTY--encouraged.--Let you wait, to hear me talking, till we're astray in Erris, when Good Friday's by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap or sunshine, with yourself stretched back unto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth.
>
> PEGEEN--in a lower voice, moved by his tone.--I'd be nice so, is it?[2]

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1 Synge: Works, II 63

2 Synge: Works, II 89

"The Playboy" is not a hard play to understand. One easily exhausts it, and it is not a play to which one would return for enrichment. This play, strange as it may seem on first thought, is not typical of Synge. True, it is perhaps his best known work, the play by which he is known to most people, but the fact remains that there is little of Synge in it. Synge was not a Playboy. He was a dreamer, a lonely dreamer, and it is only rarely that the true Synge is seen in this play. We really see him in passages like the following:

> It's well you know what call I have. It's well you know it's a lonesome thing to be passing small towns with the lights shining sideways when the night is down, or going in strange places with a dog noising before you and a dog noising behind, or drawn to the cities where you'd hear a voice kissing and talking deep love in every shadow of the ditch, and you passing on with an empty, hungry stomach failing from your heart.[1]

In these words of Christy to Pegeen the true Synge speaks. But elsewhere he is silent. Synge had never met the Playboy as he had met his Wicklow tramps. Christy is a manufactured product, and unfortunately the trade mark too often shows thru his threadbare coat. But we must not be too harsh in our judgment. The Playboy was meant to be strong spice in a spiceless world. The preface to the play establishes this point. If the play succeeds in biting our tongue, it has done what the author intended it should do. In conclusion, we may add that so far as we are concerned, "The Playboy" does bite the tongue.

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS

We have now come to a consideration of Synge's last play, "Deirdre of the Sorrows". The legend of Deirdre is famous in Ireland, and the subject is not new as dramatic material. In fact, a new "Deirdre" appears to be turned out almost every year. Just as it seems to be the ambition of every English tragic actor to play the part of Hamlet, so it

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1 Synge: Works, 11 57

seems that almost every modern Irish dramatist wishes to create a new "Deirdre". C. E. Montague says of the legend: "The Deirdre romance has the place in Irish legendry that is held in other literatures by that of Lancelot and Francesca da Rimini and that of Iseult."[1] It was therefore only natural that Synge should attempt the theme. As a matter of fact, he was pressed to do so by his friend Yeats. Mr. Yeats and "A. E. " had already dealt with the story before, but not with any marked success. These two authors gave the theme a dreamy beauty instead of the rich vitality it needed to make it live. Synge, on the other hand, brought to it this much needed vitality. F. Bickley says of Synge's treatment of the legend: "He had, one might almost say, a contempt for his original. Nevertheless he was more faithful to its spirit than either Mr. Yeats or "A. E." who treated it with greater reverence."[2] But of Synge's treatment of the tale, we shall say more.

Synge, quite naturally, threw it into a folklore mold. It is interesting to note that this is the only play Synge ever wrote in which the characters are not in a condition near to penury, - are not, that is to say, peasants. Yet the characters of this play too are really cast in peasant mold. King, princes, princess, and servants, all speak the same language, the same dialect, showing a schooling obtained from nature rather than from any royal court. In Gaelic, many versions of the legend exist; yet in most of them Deirdre and Conchubor and the sons of Usna are painted as true nobles. Synge intentionally roughened the tale. His simplification of the old story had the effect of making it truly and strongly dramatic. Yet Synge himself was chastened by the subject. His wilfulness in writing is absent here. Synge did not try to be "a lord of language" in this play, and as a result, he doesn't offend with his too lyric phrases of "The Playboy". Synge is sincere in this play, and

1-C.E.Montague: Dramatic Values, page 10; 2- F.Bickley:Synge, page 43

his language here is really dramatic rather than being merely boisterous.

But let us turn to the play itself. For the first time, we do not find it inherent in his prose works. The theme, as we have said, is taken from the old legendary story of Deirdre. In the original tale, the point stressed is the prophecy that Deirdre will bring sorrow to Ulster. In Synge's rendition of the legend, the point stressed is the love of Conchubor for Deirdre, and the love of Deirdre for Naisi. Synge laid out the play in three acts: Naisi's arrival at the place of Deirdre's captivity and their flight; the place of their exile and happiness; and their return and death at Conchubor's hands. The unity of the play, in spite of the lapse of years (the first time we have seen a lapse of years in any of Synge's plays), is perfect. The unifying motif running all thru the play is that of Old Age. In the original legend this motif was the prophecy; but that applied to Deirdre alone. Now, with Old Age as the active principle, the story assumes a more universal aspect. Synge, the lover of beauty and life, the hater of death and decay, was eminently suited to his task here. Add to this the fact that the play is largely autobiographic, and it takes on new meaning. Synge had begun to realize the sweet tragedy of love (he was engaged at this time), and he also knew that he was about to die. This, perhaps, accounts for the Old Age motif, but we can only marvel at Synge's use of it. It is this thought which makes Deirdre fly from Conchubor who wishes to marry her. It is this same consideration which causes Deirdre to return to Emain before any shadow falls upon her love. And finally, this same strain comes in at the end of the play, but now it is changed; death has won over Old Age as Deirdre says to Conchubor:

> Draw a little back from Naisi, who is young for ever. Draw a little back from the white bodies I am putting under a mound of clay and grasses that are withered--a mound will have a nook for my own self when the end is come.[1]

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1 Synge: Works, II 88

But the real worth of the play, its very Irishness if you will, lies in its intensity. The play is harsh, but the real Irishman is harsh too. C. E. Montague says: "In everything that Synge did there was a touch of harshness, in the good sense.....something stingingly sane and hard--not sourness, but just an antiseptic against sugariness and the 'sweetly pretty'." [1] Real intensity is rare in literature to-day. It is less rare in Irish literature than in English literature, for it is a characteristic of the Irish race. Synge had been harsh before, but it is only in "Deirdre" that he really becomes intense. We seem to mark here the beginning of a new period in his work, but Synge unfortunately was not granted life to perfect himself in this new phase. As it is, this play is unique for the style of language used. There are no gaudy adjectives, no favorite expressions, no verbiage, to spoil the effect. Synge speaks and speaks plainly. He is curt. He uses the words of the people, monosyllabic words that smack of the earth but touch the heart. The words mean something. We are not distracted by them. We get ideas rather than see words. This is indeed a far cry from the gaudiness of "The Playboy", as the following selection will show:

(loud knocking on door at the right.

LAVARCHAM--startled.-- Who is that?

NAISI--outside--Naisi and his brothers.

LAVARCHAM. We are lonely women. What is it you're wanting in the blackness of the night?

NAISI. We met a young girl in the woods who told us we might shelter this place if the rivers rose on the pathways and the floods gathered from the butt of the hills.

(Old woman clasps her hands in horror.

LAVARCHAM--with great alarm.--You cannot come in-.....There is no one let in here, and no young girl with us.

NAISI. Let us in from the great storm. Let us in and we will go further when the cloud will rise.

LAVARCHAM. Go round east to the shed and you'll have shelter. You cannot come in.

NAISI--knocking loudly.--Open the door or we will burst it. (The door is shaken.)

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1 C.E.Montague: Dramatic Values, page 12

OLD WOMAN--in a timid whisper.-- Let them in, and keep Deirdre in her room to-night.

AINNLE AND ARDAR--outside.--Open! Open!

LAVERCHAM--to old Woman.--Go in and keep her.

OLD WOMAN. I couldn't keep her. I've no hold on her. Go in yourself and I will free the door.

LAVARCHAM. I must stay and turn them out.(She pulls her hair and cloak over her face.) Go in and keep her.

OLD WOMAN. The Gods help us.

(She runs into the inner room.

VOICES. Open!

LAVARCHAM--opening the door.--Come in then and ill-luck if you'll have it so.

(Naisi and Ainnle and Ardan come in and look round with astonishment.

NAISI. It's a rich man has this place, and no herd at all.

LAVARCHAM--sitting down with her head half covered.--It is not, and you'd best be going quickly.

NAISI--hilariously, shaking rain from his clothes.--When we've had the pick of luck finding princely comfort in the darkness of the night! Some rich man of Ulster should come here and he chasing in the woods. May we drink? (He takes up flask.) Whose wine is this that we may drink his health?

LAVARCHAM. It's no one's that you've call to know.

NAISI. Your own health then and length of life. (Pouring out wine for the three. They drink.) [1]

This passage illustrates not only intensity, but dramatic technique. The element of alarm and suspense is in it; but above all, it is natural, it is not forced. The words speak themselves, and bewilder neither the actors nor the audience. Truly, Synge was becoming a great dramatist.

A brief summary of the legend as Synge treats it may be in prder here to illustrate what we have said about it and what we shall say further. As the first act opens, Deirdre is out of doors frolicking thru the woods. Her nurse and her servant are talking about her wilfulness as Conchubor arrives with Fergus. Deirdre, upon entering, is filled with terror as she is told that she must wed Conchubor within a day or two. When Conchubor goes, Deirdre forms a great resolution. The night becomes stormy. She, in expectancy, dons her regal robes; and not in vain. Naisi and his brothers seek shelter for the night.

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1 Synge: Works, 11 32

After much haggling they are let in the house by Lavarcham. They seek the wild girl of the woods, and are almost deceived into leaving by the old nurse when Deirdre appears in all her glory. Naisi is at first amazed, and then won over. As the act closes, the two are wed by Ainnle, Naisi's brother. In Act two, Fergus arrives at Alban bearing Conchubor's word that Deirdre and Naisi may return safely to Emain. Naisi at first refuses, but admits to Fergus that he is afraid that his love for Deirdre may pall some day. Deirdre overhears this remark, and that is enough for her. She convinces Naisi and his brothers that they should return to Emain for: "It may be we do well putting a sharp end to the day is brave and glorious."[1] And so they return. In Act three, we see the working out of the tragedy. The focal point of the whole act is the open grave on the stage. Conchubor proves to be treacherous, and Naisi and the sons of Usna are put to death. Fergus, notified too late, sacks Emain Macha; but the mischief is done. Deirdre kills herself by the grave containing the bodies of the sons of Usna, and the tragedy is complete. The prophecy has been realized, and is now only a tale that will be told.

The characters of the play are interesting to study. Deirdre, to begin with, is portrayed not as a queen but as an untamed unspoiled child of nature. She does nothing by halves. Lavarcham describes her character early in the play when she says: "Who'd check her like was meant to have her pleasure only."[2] Deirdre's one object in life is to love and be loved. She is perfectly happy so long as there falls no blight on her union with Naisi. But once she overhears his fear expressed to Fergus, she changes completely. Nothing can hold her in Alban any longer to risk seeing love die. Her conversation with Naisi at this point is wonderful for its tender melancholic resignation:

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1 Synge: Works, II 65
2 Synge: Works, II 16

DEIRDRE--clearly and gravely.--It's this hour we're between the daytime and a night where there is sleep for ever, and isn't it a better thing to be following on to a near death, than to be bending the head down, and dragging with the feet, and seeing one day a blight showing upon love where it is sweet and tender.

NAISI--his voice broken with distraction.--If a near death is coming what will be my trouble losing the earth and the stars over it, and you, Deirdre, are their flame and bright crown? Come away into the safety of the woods.

DEIRDRE--shaking her head slowly.--There are as many ways to wither love as there are stars in a night of Samhain; but there is no way to keep life, or love with it, a short space only....It's for that there's nothing lonesome like a love is watching out the time most lovers do be sleeping....It's for that we're setting out for Emain Macha when the tide turns on the sand.

NAISI--giving in.--You're right, maybe. It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old.

DEIRDRE--with a more tender intensity.--We're seven years without roughness or growing weary; seven years so sweet and shining, the gods would be hard set to give us seven days the like of them. It's for that we're going to Emain, where there'll be a rest for ever, or a place for forgetting, in great crowds and they making a stir.[1]

In speeches like this, Deirdre shows herself superior to Naisi. Compared to her, he seems dull and slow. This is particularly true when, in the first act, Deirdre presses him to take her away from Conchubor. Deirdre is made of finer stuff than most of Synge's women. We have only to compare her to Pegeen of "The Playboy" to prove this point. Compare for example, Deirdre's farewell to Alban and the love she knew there with Pegeen's lament on losing her playboy. The contrast is startling, and all in favor of Deirdre. Then, compare Deirdre ordering her gowns to be laid out in style with Pegeen ordering her trousseau. It is true that here one woman is a queen and the other only the daughter of a publican; but even this social chasm doesn't account for their enormous difference in sensibility. Synge had gone far in the interval between "The Playboy" and "Deirdre".

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1 Synge: Works, II 60

Of Naisi, there is little to be said. As we have already remarked, he is infinitely inferior to Deirdre, and serves only as a pawn to her character. Conchubor is, however, an arresting figure. In his person lies real tragedy, for he is divided in his mind. Conchubor is the man frustrated. Even in the beginning, he fears he will never possess Deirdre, a fear he voices in the following speech:

> It's my wish to have you quickly; I'm sick and weary thinking of the day you'll be brought down to me, and seeing you walking into my big, empty halls. I've made all sure to have you, and yet all said there's fear in the back of my mind I'd miss you and have great troubles in the end. It's for that,Deirdre, I'm praying that you'll come quickly; and you may take the word of a man has no lies, you'll not find, with any other, the like of what I'm bringing you in wildness and confusion in my own mind.[1]

This fear is always with him. It goads him on to treachery, it makes of him a pitiful figure. The real tragedy at the end of the play is his. Could any speech be more pitiful than this of Conchubor to Fergus as he gazes on the body of Deirdre in the open grave: "Conchubor - with the voice of an old man.- 'Take me with you. I'm hard set to see the way before me?'"[2] Conchubor it is who has suffered, and Conchubor it is who shall suffer till he too shall lie in the grave. The fact of his being High King of Ulster only makes his grief more pathetic. Owen is Synge's own addition to the play. He is not found in the original legend. Owen is a character insufficiently developed. Synge, we believe, intended to make of him some such character as we find among Shakespeare's fools. Unfortunately, Synge died too soon.

"Deirdre" has been called the most Irish of Synge's plays. It is so for two reasons: first, because of the core of hardness that is in it; and second, because of its overflow of feeling for Ireland. We have already spoken of this first consideration: that real Irish literature is fundamentally harsh. We can perhaps best illustrate this

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1 Synge: Works, II 26
2 Synge: Works, II 93

feature by a quotation from the scene where Deirdre and Naisi part for the last time. These two, who love each other so passionately that they prefer physical death to the death of their love, take leave of each other in the end with bitter words on their lips. Naisi's brothers cry for help:

> DEIRDRE--clinging to Naisi.--There is no battle. . . . Do not leave me, Naisi.
>
> NAISI. I must go to them.
>
> DEIRDRE°°beseechingly.--Do not leave me, Naisi. Let us creep up in the darkness behind the grave. If there's a battle, maybe the strange fighters will be destroyed, when Ainnle and Ardan are against them.
>
> (Cries heard.
>
> NAISI--wildly.--I hear Ardan crying out. Do not hold me from my brothers.
>
> DEIRDRE. Do not leave me, Naisi. Do not leave me broken and alone.
>
> NAISI. I cannot leave my brothers when it is I who have defied the king.
>
> DEIRDRE. I will go with you.
>
> NAISI. You cannot come. Do not hold me from the fight.
>
> (He throws her aside almost roughtly.
>
> DEIRDRE--with restraint-- Go to your brothers. For seven years you have been kindly, but the hardness of death has come between us.
>
> NAISI--looking at her aghast.--And you'll have me meet death with a hard word from your lips in my ear?
>
> DEIRDRE. We've had a dream, but this night has waked us surely. In a little while we've lived too long, Naisi, and isn't it a poor thing we should miss the safety of the grave, and we trampling its edge?
>
> AINNLE--behind.--Naisi, Naisi, we are attacked and ruined!
>
> DEIRDRE. Let you go where they are calling. (She looks at him for an instant coldly.) Have you no shame loitering and talking, and a cruel death facing Ainnle and Ardan in the woods?
>
> NAISI--frantic.--They'll not get a death that's cruel, and they with men alone. It's women that have loved are cruel only; and if I went on living from this day I'd be putting a curse on the lot of them I'd meet walking in the east or west, putting a curse on the sun that gave them beauty, and on the madder and the stone-crop put red upon their cloaks.
>
> DEIRDRE--bitterly.--I'm well pleased there's no one in this place to make a story that Naisi was a laughing-stock the night he died.
>
> NAISI. There'd not be many'd make a story, for that mockery in your eyes this night will spot the face of Emain with a plague of pitted graves. (he goes out.
>
> CONCHUBOR--outside-- That is Naisi. Strike him! (Tumult. Deirdre crouches down on Naisi's cloak. Conchubor comes in hurriedly.) They've met their death--the three that stole you, Deirdre, and from this out you'll be my queen in Emain.[1]

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1 Synge: Works, II 79

This ending is harsh, but no lyric ending could so move us to compassion. Here is a parting between two people who really love, not mildly, but intensely.

The overflow of feeling for Ireland is everywhere apparent in this play. Deirdre says, when she wants to leave Alban: "It's a lonesome thing to be away from Ireland always."[1] But the most obvious example of this love of Ireland is shown in the use of place names. Synge left most of these names as he found them in the legend, and their very sound is suggestive: Sleive Fuadh, Emain Macha, Connaught, Alban, Cuan, etc. We have here an example of an Anglo-Irish author writing of Ireland for Irishmen. The result is real "Irish" literature.

Of the play as a whole we can say little but good. It is a mellow play, a mature play like Shakespeare's "Tempest"; and of all Synge's plays it shows the greatest potentialities. The play is unfinished. Several versions were found after Synge's death; one of them was fit for publication. That is the edition we now have, but it is certain that Synge would have altered even this version had he lived. It is hardly fair to criticize a work which we know to be unrevised, yet we feel sure that Synge, upon revision, would never have left expressions like "a sight nearer", and "getting the cold shoulder", slip by. Other passages too lack Synge's careful touch, but again we feel certain that the fault is to be laid at Death's door rather than at Synge's. We can only say that this play proves that Synge died prematurely. It bears promise of a genius that, slow in ripening, was finally attaining maturity. Yet even what we have expressed here is enough to warrant all our praise. C. E. Montague summarizes the whole situation well in these few lines: "All that was Synge, from first to last, is expressed in this play--the sure ear, the instinct for idiom, the brooding joy in hard strong lines of character, the disdain for artistic compromise, the

energy of tragic imagination, and also a new serenity of beauty".[1] We can add little to that. It seems fitting that Synge's last play should be his best. We can only regret that it was his last. This feeling of regret was general among those who knew him. We find W. B. Yeats, for example, voicing these sentiments as he wrote on the premature death of his friend:

> The misfortune is for the living certainly, that must work on, perhaps in vain, to magnify the minds and hearts of our young men, and not for the dead....and if we speak among ourselves, it is of the thoughts that have no savour because we cannot hear his laughter, of the work more difficult because of the strength he has taken with him, of the astringent joy and hardness that was in all he did, and of his fame in the world.[2]

A fitting tribute from one literary man to another.

Conclusion

There now remains to be considered only Synge's volume of "Poems and Translations." These poems are not, of course, drama; consequently we shall not devote a great deal of time to them here. We do wish to mention them in passing, however, to round out this discussion of Synge. We feel justified in so doing, because they are illustrative of the man. As Mr. Masefield says, the poems are the man speaking. Like Synge's other works, they deal with folk lore and with nature. But as evidences of literature they are less integral than his other writings. They do not seem to have received the same careful treatment Synge afforded his prose works. The poems are exercises rather than finished creations. But our interest in them shall be autobiographic, because the poems are that, whatever else they may or may not be. In almost a third of them, Synge speaks of death. Two of them are definitely personal, and illustrate well this fear that constantly obsessed him: the "Epitaph" and "On an Anniversary". We should like to quote the last four lines of this

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1 C. E. Montague: Dramatic Values, page 14
2 W. B. Yeats: Cutting of an Agate, page 139

second poem:

> And so when all my little work is done
> They'll say I came in Eighteen-seventy-one,
> And died in Dublin---What year will they write
> For my passage to the stall of night? [1]

These lines take on new meaning when we consider that Synge died while the book was going thru the press. In conclusion, we may say of these poems and translations that they are at least true to the preface which precedes them. They deal with the profound and common interests of life, thereby remaining "Syngese" until the end.

It but now remains to close this consideration of Synge as a man and a dramatist. It is not our intention to try here to determine his niche in the hierarchy of literary figures. That is too colossal a task for us, and we had rather shift the responsibility to Time who does such things much better. We should, however, like to make clear a few more modest points. The most fitting praise of Synge's work is that it is rich in those qualities which literature cannot well afford to do without. His characters, while they are not profound, stir us out of our everyday complacency. They are elemental and fundamental. They are not nice, - we should not like to see a world populated only with them; but they are necessary, - we shall always be glad to find a few of them. We have compared Synge's characters before to spice. We may now carry the analogy farther, and compare Synge himself to the spice element in the pie of literature. Therein, perhaps more than in any other way, lies the true worth of Synge.

But when we consider Synge in a more local sense he assumes even greater proportions. He has proved that Anglo-Irish writing has the possibilities of becoming real literature. He has established a beacon for those who may come after him. With him, the term Anglo-Irish takes on new meaning. Here is none of your Goldsmith, none of your Shaw, writing for Englishmen. Here is an Irishman writing for Ireland and

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1 Synge: Works, II 16

for Irishmen. The language used happens to be English, that is all. In this respect, Synge should assume the same proportion in the eyes of Irishmen as Lessing does in the eyes of his countrymen. Each man has, in his way, begun the awakening of a nation to self-realization.

And that, is all we shall say about Synge here. We do not wish to compose panegyrics about him. Too many have done that already. It is enough, we think, to say that he has brought back reality and joy to the theatre, brought them back in a drama that is eminently alive and well-worth reading, a drama that shall be, we think, still well-worth reading for many years to come.

SUMMARY

The foregoing thesis is an attempt to evaluate John Millington Synge as a literary man and as a dramatist. Synge is first considered in relation to Anglo-Irish literature, the point being made that he was one of the pioneers in establishing this literature on a firm basis. Synge is then considered as a man. His early life is studied. Then come the formative years of travel on the continent. Finally, the reason for Synge's return to Ireland is made clear. In this connection is presented a brief discussion of the then newly-opened Abbey Theatre, and Synge's practical affiliation with the group sponsoring it.

There then follows a more or less general discussion of Synge as a dramatist. His artistic creed is studied as it is stated in his prefaces. His failings as a dramatist are noted along with his better characteristics. His style of language and manner of writing is presented in some detail. Synge's Irish characteristics are noted along with his non-Irish touches. Throughout the discussion, Synge is never lost sight of as an Irish dramatist writing for Irish people.

After this general discussion, the individual plays are studied

in detail. Effort is made to determine the sources of the plays, and to show how they came into being. The main characters of the plays are dealt with, along with more general dramatic criticisms. This leads us to the short conclusion where Synge's work is appraised in the light of what has been said before. No effort is made here to fix Synge's place in literature. It is hoped, however, that that has been done in some short measure throughout the preceding pages.

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LIST OF PLAYS, WITH DATES OF FIRST PERFORMANCE [1]

1903.	Oct. 8.	In the Shadow of the Glen, At the Molesworth Hall, Dublin.
1904.	Feb. 25.	Riders to the Sea. At the Molesworth Hall, Dublin.
1905.	Feb.	The Well of the Saints. At the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.
1907.	Jan. 26.	The Playboy of the Western World. At the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.
1907.	June	The Playboy of the Western World, etc. First performed in London; at the Great Queen Street Theatre.
1909.	(Mar. 24.	J. M. Synge died.)
1909.	Nov. 11.	The Tinker's Wedding. At His Majesty's Theatre, London, (The Afternoon Theatre).
1910.	Jan. 13.	Deirdre of the Sorrows. At the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.
1911.	Oct.	The Playboy of the Western World, etc. First performed in United States of America.

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[1] Taken from P. P. Howe: Synge, page 216

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